UNKNOWN Worlds

25c DEC · 1942
FANTASY FICTION

THE SORCERER'S SHIP . . . . . by Hannes Bok

A ship of magic, of plot and counterplot, sails an unknown sea in a world beyond man's ken—with a demigod as passenger and a strange and magic jewel for cargo!

THE ELIXIR . . . . . by Jane Rice

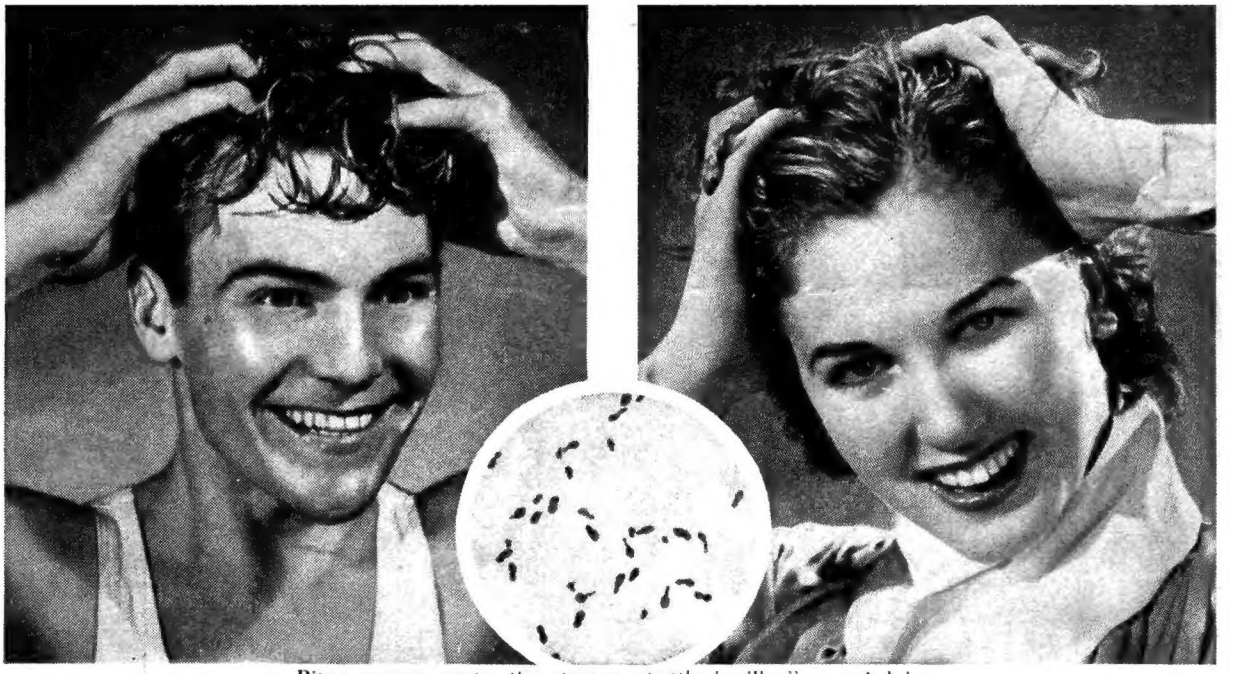
She had no intention of achieving quite the effect she did when she mixed that cocktail—but it was quite an heroic affair in any case. It landed her bang! in the midst of Salem witch-hunts, complete with her Halloween witch costume, and 1942 business-woman efficiency—

TRANSIENTS ONLY . . . by Malcolm Jameson

Grandmother's old home—er, boardinghouse—was menaced by the OPA rent ceilings above and the nether millstone of a triple-decker set of mortgages below. But grandson had studied hard—studied ghosts and their habits. And not even a well-haunted house can stay empty in Washington these days—

THE HAG SELEEN . . by Theodore Sturgeon and James H. Beard

In the half-drowned bayou country, there is a clinging, evil miasma of the old magic, and the old witches. Modern adults don't believe, or learn easily—but a child with a gift for little rhymes and chants anyway can learn—



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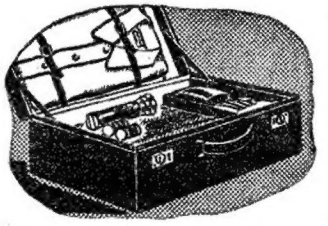

2 WHEN STARTING A TRIP, don't toss your flashlight *loaded* into your suitcase, haversack or toolbox. Unscrew, or remove batteries—then switch can't "catch" and waste batteries.

3 KEEP FLASHLIGHT OUT OF CHILDREN'S REACH. It is not a toy—but a tool for your convenience and safety. *Know* where it is at all times—so you can put your hand on it quickly when you *need* it.

4 DON'T THROW AWAY A BROKEN FLASHLIGHT until you're sure it can't be fixed. Minor repairs can quickly be made, lens or bulb may be replaced.

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UNKNOWN WORLDS

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NEXT ISSUE
ON SALE
DECEMBER 24
25c PER COPY

Printed in the U.S.A.

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OF THINGS BEYOND

AERONAUTICAL PIXIES

Some months back we pointed out that most mythology seemed based on (a) the cussedness of things in general, and (b) a desire to evoke somewhat more amenable behavior in the young—the latter involving such happy little beings as hobgoblins, ogres and anthropophagic giants.

Modern psychology has somewhat lessened the tendency toward the latter aim, however commendable it may sometimes seem, even necessary in the case of some unadulterated and uninhibited bratlings, but the cussedness of things remains in all its old-time glory. The cussedness of the land is old—old as the pixies, the brownies and the leprechauns. The cussedness of the seas is old; see the various beings of uncertain temper who paid homage to Neptune.

In modern times, the deep-sea divers have encountered trouble, trouble of an otherwise-inexplicable nature, from "ga-nomies." The men who worked at salvaging the *Squalus* were willing to tell anyone about the cussed nature of the "ganomies" that hounded that none-too-easy operation.

It was inevitable, of course, that the aeronautical pixie should evolve. No domain as big as the atmosphere could be expected to remain free of the lords and masters of the cussedness of things. A recent United Press dispatch from London reveals that these impartial makers of mischief have arrived, a new breed with—there's some doubt, it seems, as to the exact nature of it—flying mechanisms attached to their shoulders. The "gremlins" have been well and unfavorably known to the R. A. F. for some time; the United States Army Air Corps is now learning of their evil ways.

The United Press report follows:

LONDON (UP).—The "gremlins"—something like pixies—are now at work on the United States Army Air Forces. They are a mysterious little folk who delight in spreading ice on the wings and propellers of planes flying over Germany. They climb inside gun barrels and deflect bullets from their course.

They have been plaguing the Royal Air Force since the start of the war. Now they haunt the crews of American Flying Fortresses. Nobody ever has seen a gremlin. Experienced R. A. F. pilots swear, however, that they wear caps, tight breeches and ruffles at the neck. Sometimes they wear spats.

The first gremlin reported in an American plane rode the flying fortress *Big Punk* when the waist gunner, Sergeant Z. E. White, of Dallas, Texas, reported his guns jammed just as he got a German Focke-Wulf 190 fighter plane in his sights during last Friday's battle over the North Sea.

When he landed, Sergeant White told his story to Pilot Officer Oscar Coen, of Murphysboro, Illinois, one of the original three members of the R. A. F.'s American Eagle Squadron and a noted gremlinologist. Coen nodded his head and said, "Gremlins," making it official that they were working on Uncle Sam's men.

There seem to be little boy as well as little girl gremlins. There are no "good gremlins" or "bad gremlins" as such. They are just hell-raisers, more mischievous than irresponsible, who might do a good turn or precipitate a disaster, depending on their current mood.

R. A. F. experts say the gremlins get inside carburetors and put their thumbs over the jets, "conking" out the motors. Then, just when the pilot is somewhere over Bremen with a German searchlight on him, the gremlins remove their thumbs and the motors start up again.

A common type of gremlin, according to the experts, is the one who hangs on the aileron with his feet flapping and gives the entire ship a slight flutter. That gremlin has a brother who sits on the pilot's shoulder making sounds like a motor knocking when the plane is hitting on all cylinders.

The most annoying gremlins are those who like to get into the instrument board. They play seesaw on the automatic horizon or merry-go-round on the compass. They get their greatest kick out of such antics when the pilot is flying "blind" through clouds.

Pilot Officer Coen said he hoped the American fliers would settle one problem which has been bothering the R. A. F. gremlinologists and has split them into two camps.

"One school says the gremlins have wings on their shoulders shaped like a tennis racket," Coen said. "The other says they have a small propeller on each shoulder. I hope the United States Army Air Forces establish once and for all the truth of this problem."

The Editor.

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THE SORCERER'S SHIP

By Hannes Bok

○ A strange ship on a strange, unearthly world, it was—with a demigod as a passenger, and an enchanted jewel as cargo!

I.

The nightmare ended, but the rocking sensation persisted. There was a curious glassy sound, like the clinking of many bottles.

He was conscious only of intense pain, his body burning as though he had been scalded and whipped. His eyes were closed, but searing light wedged under their inflamed lids. It was an effort to open them. He was as weak as if one of the vampires of his delirium had drained away all his strength and left him dying. He blinked in pain, attempted to lift a feeble hand protectively to his face, could not, and shut his eyes again. Hot sunlight pressed down on him like an incandescent weight. And—where was he?

He opened his eyes again, but cautiously. As his body swayed—he seemed cradled in a giant's arms—one of his hands slipped aside and down into icy water. Unthinkingly he jerked it back, and the quick movement started blood and a ghost of power through his veins. Water? He struggled to sit up, failed. Groaning with exertion, he forced up his head and squinted around him. There was a curious crackling at the motion.

He was lying on a battered platform of charred wood that was white and sparkling with a coating of salt. His head had been pillowed on a bundle of crisp dry seaweed; that was what had crackled. What had happened to his clothes? He was in swimming trunks, and they were stiff and powdered with salt. All around him, merging into the sky, was lazily stirring water.

What was he doing here on this raftlike wreckage? He frowned, trying to remember, and as his brows pulled together, pain shot through them like the jab of countless needles. He dragged a hand to his forehead; it was raw, blistered and peeling from long exposure to the sun.

Strength was reluctantly returning to him.

Clamping his teeth together, he bent an arm, rolled over on it and levered himself up to sitting posture. He propped his arms behind him and leaned back against their support exhausted, his head drooping. Ripples lapping the raft murmured gently, mockingly, as though from throats of glass.

He lifted his head perplexedly. He had been trying to remember something, but what? It eluded him. Well, no matter—here he was on a bit of driftwood, apparently miles out at sea. He'd better worry about getting back to land, wherever that was.

Perhaps it was his weakness, but he sensed that something was wrong with the sky. It was too blue, and it seemed to flicker here and there, as though it was not air but a sheet of blue lightning. And the sun quivered as though he were looking at its reflection on restless water, or seeing it through shimmering heat.

He folded his legs and leaned over them, his head bent, the sun hot on his back. It was hard to think. He ran his tongue over his cracked lips, tasted salt, and suddenly was very thirsty. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced avidly at the water, but he knew better than to try drinking it.

He stood up, tottering on the swaying raft. There was no sign of land. Only water. He lurched, almost fell, and gingerly seated himself again as though upon broken glass. He exhaled heavily, with a sound that was a blend of sob and sigh. The afternoon limped along toward dusk as though each minute had stretched into an hour. Once a large fish broke water, far away—that was all.

At sundown he was lying on his stomach, staring down into the empty depths of blue-black water. Intuitively he lifted his head. The sun was a scarlet disk on the horizon, with a tremulous red path stretching from it across the water to the raft. But there was a dark speck against the brilliant disk—he made a visor of his hand over his brow and peered at the speck. It was tiny with distance. A ship? His eyes widened with eager hope and he grinned foolishly as he raised himself to hail it. Slowly the dark shape enlarged, and as slowly the sun became waterlogged and settled into the sea, leaving wavering trails in the blue lightning of the atmosphere to mark its path of descent. Purple twilight rolled in from the east like colored mist, bringing with it a cool wind that was like a soothing salve on his sunburn. The sea lifted drowsily, as though awaking, and slow swells swung the raft up and down, almost upsetting the standing man.

In the deepening dusk the approaching vessel was a silhouette. The man waved his arms and pitifully essayed to leap up and down, but he was still not strong enough; he reeled and nearly toppled over. He opened his mouth but no sound could emerge, only a scraping gust of breath, and he waited impatiently, his hands held high, signaling.

The wind was colder now and hurried. It drove waves before it like cattle, whipping them into a froth of haste. They wrenched the raft as though forcing it out of their path; thrown from his balance, the man dropped to his knees. Stars pushed aside the curtains of sky to look down. The man looked back into the night from which the chilly wind came. The foam-crested waves were tumbling over each other in their rush, grumbling confusedly. The ship was an expanding shadow.

The man's eyes ached from staring; he flailed his arms desperately. The ship cut through the water toward him, no lights glinting from its hulk or rigging. And now he saw that it was a peculiar type of ship—a kind that he had never actually seen on water. Water was sliding over the raft and he clung to the warped planks, his eyes on the vessel. Where had he seen it? He pressed his lips together, concentrating.

In books! In motion pictures! It seemed to be a viking galley, but that was rather farfetched. A viking galley on the seas today? Impossible! Yet here it was, certainly real enough, very close now. He could discern the striped red-and-yellow sail even in the gloom. The raft jerked, almost throwing him on his face. The ship was hardly a thousand feet away. He waved futilely, considered a moment, and, cupping his palms, lifted them to his face. He gargled the bitter sea water and spat. Now he could shout. He could hardly hear his hoarse voice above the uproar of the waves —and could those on the vessel hear him over the wailing of the wind?

The ship was darting toward him like a charging beast. If it did not strike him it would pass close —very close. The man shouted again. They must have heard him. Abruptly exhausted, he relaxed and waited. The ship was almost abreast of him, only fifty feet away. He leaped to his feet, made a megaphone of his hands at his mouth and shouted. He thought that he glimpsed men on board, but they did not answer. The ship swept past him and onward. He turned after it, waving, yelling, dancing up and down in his excitement.

There was no reply. The ship was dwindling. He slipped and cracked down on the splintered planking, lay half stunned, his head raised, his eyes on the diminishing vessel. A cold wave washed over him, brushing him along with it. He dug his fingers into the cracks between the planking and hung on. The wind was very cold. His teeth were clattering; chills forked up his spine; his fingers grew numb. The wind did not abate. He was back in a nightmare again, not delirium's surrealistic phantoms, but the brutal reality of

violent water and sharp-fanged wind. The stars watched without pity. Even in his torment the man turned up his white face to them and wondered at their great number and nearness. The quivering sky was black now, a limitless tract of living darkness.

His grip was slackening; he could hold on only a little longer. A wave trampled over him, tearing one hand loose. The raft tilted up buoyantly and the man choked and spluttered. He thrust his loosened fingers back between the planks, wincing as he scraped the flesh. The raft bobbed; his head jerked—and he saw a cluster of dim, yellow lights. They were not stars; their glow was steady. A wave twisted the raft. As though dreaming, the man watched the group of lights widen—they seemed to be coming nearer.

The ship! Had they heard him, then, and were coming back for him? He pulled one hand loose, half knelt and waved, shouting. The lights bore down on him. There was a momentary lull in the wind; he shouted again without any definite wording. The ship rushed toward him, was passing him. It was not the same vessel that he had seen before. It was more like an old Venetian galley, two-sailed, and ablaze with colored lanterns. He hailed it again and there was an answering cry. A brilliant light fingered the water and focused on him. There were more answering calls. A boat was being lowered over the side of the ship.

While the little boat was bobbing over the waves to him, he lay resting on the rough wood, his eyes fascinated by the silken shimmer of the sagging sails, momentarily empty of wind. A voice summoned him; he raised his head to reply. The boat was only a few yards away, and now it was bumping against the raft. He endeavored to scramble aboard, but on the way he collapsed. He was conscious of strong hands pulling him from the raft. He lay in the bottom of the boat, comfortable in his security though the boat's ribs were hard under him, and sandal-shod oarsmen's feet inadvertently kicked him as the rowers pulled on their oars.

There was an interval of lying in the boat, looking up at the swaying heavens and the oarsmen. Then the boat thudded against the ship; ropes were thrown down and made fast; the boat scratched up the side of the ship and was drawn over to the deck. The rowers leaped out, but the rescued man was too weary to move. He glimpsed crowding faces and brilliantly colored robes that were vaguely Oriental. Then a girl's face appeared, soft and sympathetic.

He heard a man's voice, mild and compassionate. "Take him to my cabin." Was that what the man had said? But he had been speaking with a very heavy accent—his words had seemed to be in a foreign language. Now that was odd!

He was lifted again and carried under the wavering sheen of the sails through a squat doorway into a dimly lighted, narrow hallway that was fragrant with the tang of spice. The walls were minutely carved, garishly painted. Then another door, and a low-ceilinged room lit only by the tremulant flame of a swinging lamp. All that he could see was the dusky drapery over a wide low bed. He was laid down on the soft mattress. His bearers stepped back. He was sinking into the softness as though down into a fleecy cloud—

A tall and very slender old man in a long blue robe approached the bed. He leaned over the rescued person, his kind face concerned. He touched the man's forehead and breast, turned away, his hand lifting in command. "Bring him something to drink—something strong."

The man on the bed heard the clink of glass. There was a rustle of fluttering filmy draperies and a faint feminine perfume. "Here it is," a girl's voice murmured gently. The girl he had seen on the deck was standing beside the man in blue, a decanter and a goblet in her hands.

She appeared to be very tall then, but that was because he was lying down. She was really quite small. She was not beautiful, no, but finely made and very attractive. Her childishly youthful face was pale, her clear brown eyes enormous. She was probably eighteen years old. What was her nationality? She was not much different from any of the girls he had known—somewhere before. There was nothing exotic about her despite the strange manner in which her hair was coiffed, its brown braids piled high and held in place by strands of jewels. In her long, plum-colored gown with its flowing slit sleeves held to her arms by wide bracelets, she might have been in evening dress. And she was very feminine. Her slightest movements were performed with unconscious grace.

"Here, drink." The man in blue touched the goblet to the other's mouth. "It will strengthen you." The rescued man sipped the liquid. It was aromatic and sweet, replacing his weariness with singing warmth. But he kept his eyes on the girl.

Her hand was on the shoulder of the man in blue. "Look—his skin! See how the sun has burned it! I have a soothing unguent that will soften the bite of pain—I'll get it." She was gone. The man from the sea looked regretfully after her. He was becoming drowsy from the warmth of the wine, and his eyelids seemed very heavy. He lowered them.

Then she was back. He was aware of the soft fragrance that surrounded her like an aura and opened his eyes. She was kneeling beside the bed, unstoppering a small flask of red glass. She poured a thick oil out on the palm of one hand and rubbed it over his face. Her touch was as light as a summer breeze; the oil was cool and

soothing. For a moment her eyes met his, and something vibrated in the air between them—what it was, he could not be sure, but it was as pleasant as it was indefinable. Her eyes lowered almost guiltily, and her touch became brisk, almost curt. She smoothed the oil into his chest and then their eyes met again.

He was very sleepy and hardly knew what he was doing. His hand crept over his chest, found hers and gripped it gently. Perhaps he was trying to express his gratitude for her kindness, perhaps more. Even he was not sure. She permitted the touch.

Then the man in blue spoke curtly. "Enough, Siwara. Leave us now. I'll take good care of him."

The girl arose at once. The man took the flask from her hands. She slipped back from the bed, toward the door, merged into the shadows and disappeared. The wind was rising again; it howled outside with a maniac's abandon.

His eyes would stay open no longer. The man in blue was rubbing the oil over him.

It was a strange ship, apparently out of another world. He was secure from the sea on it. Where was it going? Who were these people? He did not care very much just now. Except that girl, of course—

He sighed happily, his eyes still shut. Sleep blanketed him in darkness.

II.

He awoke feeling well but deliciously lazy. Light, warm coverlets had been drawn over him up to his chin. As he opened his eyes he sensed someone hurrying from the room and turned too late to observe who the person might be. White daylight seeped over the bed from a row of high little windows and the ship lifted and lowered as gradually as the breast of a sleeping person.

What a strange little cabin it was! Most of its walls were brass-bolted cupboards whose doors had been carved and gilded with bewildering bands of intricate designs. Tapestries depicting fairy-tale splendors and crusted with gems hung here and there. On the floor were immense wooden chests and backless armchairs with inlaid designs of wood. A somber, deep-piled rug, almost like gray fur, covered the floor.

On one of the chests lay a long bow and a sheaf of arrows; long javelins were clipped to the walls as though part of the ornaments; shields hung under the row of small windows and slid like pendulums at the ship's motion.

The door swung inward and a tall man in red entered. He was a creature of planes, sharp lines and abrupt angles. His long face was like an unfinished wood carving, sharp and very definite before sandpapering had modified its lines of ruthless strength. His robe, too, was severe, its folds falling in stiff vertical lines. His eyes were dark and unpleasant under heavy brows; his graying hair was brushed back from his forehead and hung to the nape of his neck in ragged points.

He stood beside the bed, his eyes calculating. A mask of kindness spread over his face like stretched rubber, barely concealing the coldness beneath. "I am Froar." His voice was harsh and dry, like stones rubbed together. "I was asleep when they found you. And you who are you?" He sat casually on the edge of the bed, tucking the skirts of his robe around him as though chilled.

The man from the sea sounded uncertain. "I don't really now," he said, apologetically. He frowned, reminiscing. "I can't remember much. Only the water . and the wind—"

"Are you from Koph or Nanich?" Froar's eyes needled him, impatient for an answer.

"Koph? Nanich?"

"What is your name?"

"Name?" The rescued man pondered, pressing a palm to his brow. He looked up. "I'm sorry to be so helpless. I just can't think. Gene, I think it is . my name." He considered further. "Gene , what? I can't think. It just won't come to me."

"Gene," Froar murmured. "How did you come to be out on the sea? Was there a shipwreck? You were a fisher, belike, blown far from shore, and your craft capsized?"

Gene shook his head. "No, I don't think so. I know I wasn't a fisher. I'm pretty confused. All I seem to remember is a great city, and many people—"

"Nanich," Froar interposed, as though naming the place.

"No, not Nanich. New New York." Gene brightened. "Yes, that's it, New York."

"Never heard of it," Froar said.

"One thing puzzles me," Gene said. "The air here—it seems different—as if charged with electricity." But Froar did not comprehend the word. "And you—and the others—all seem to speak a strange language, something I've never heard before. And yet—I can understand it."

"Your language is equally strange to my ears," Froar said. "It is not the tongue of either Koph or Nanich. But I can understand your meaning. It is as if your tongue is silent and your thought is heard. A few of us here have the power of communicating our thoughts, but only a very few. Perhaps you were of importance in New York." He savored the city's name.

"Importance? I don't think so." Gene dropped his eyes thoughtfully. "I can't remember." He lifted his gaze. "All that I can remember completely is the ocean, and the wind, and that other ship that passed by me."

"Other ship! Another ship passed you?" Froar's semblance of sympathy was fading away. Gene nodded. Froar leaned forward, squinting. "What was this ship like?"

"It came just after sundown. There were no lights on it. The sail was striped with red and yellow."

There was no kindness at all on Froar's rugged face now. He sat upright with a jerk. "You told this to Kaspel to any others?"

Gene shook his head. "No. I was too tired."

"Good. Then don't." Froar leaned forward eagerly. "They would misunderstand you, all those others. They might not even believe—as I believe. You, a stranger from a place named New York—a place that doesn't exist! Here there are only Koph and Nanich and the uncharted isles in the far seas beyond. But I believe you." He smiled slyly. "Yes, I do believe you. And I'd help you if you'd trust in me. You might need my help."

He drew back. "Here you are, a lone man, obviously mad—at least in the eyes of the others, prating about a place no one ever heard of. Where will you go at the end of this voyage? What will you do?" He spread his hands eloquently. "But I see something in you—you may be of use to me. And you have the power of speaking by thought and—" He stared about at the embellished walls. "You will let me help you, do as I say?"

"Well, it's really very good of you—"

"First you must kill Kaspel. You saw Kaspel? His color is blue, even as mine is red." Gene recalled the tall old man in blue who had given him wine, and nodded. "While he is on this ship we're all in danger. If he were to learn about that boat you saw he might do some very unpleasant things—scuttle this ship, for instance." His harsh voice was introspective. "While Kaspel lives we're in danger."

"The girl," Gene asked irrelevantly, she?"

Froar's hard eyes scanned him. "Siwara, the princess of Nanich. You're on her ship. We're bound to Koph for State reasons. Koph threatens war on Nanich. Siwara goes under my guidance to make secret peace. We've no escort because we left ostensibly on a pleasure trip along the coast. But Kaspel invited himself along and he means this ship never to arrive in Koph. Why? He's old—and foolish. His thoughts have no more meaning. If he were dead we'd be safe—you and I and Siwara." He was pleased about something. "So—you saw her."

"She's—lovely. But about killing this Kaspel, this man in blue—" Gene shook his head gravely. "I don't know what to answer—"

"You seem shocked." Froar's smile was condescending. "Of what importance is a life? We kill to eat. We kill the forest beast that threatens us. Kaspel is a mad beast who must be exterminated. You seem interested in Princess Siwara, and you wouldn't like her to die, would you? But she will before we can reach Koph, unless Kaspel is accounted for."

"I saw them for only a few minutes. I was dreadfully tired. They seemed on good terms."

"There's the sadness of it. Kaspel is a hypocrite who fawns on the princess. He's been with her since childhood. But his mind is set against our mission to Koph. He'd rather have Nanich at war with Koph, the fool! He'd sacrifice his country and his princess for his silly ideals!"

"Why don't you kill him yourself?"

"I? Don't you think that I'm watched? His men spy on me, and some of the crew are in his pay. Oh, I, too, have my spies—but I'm not sure that I can trust them. But you are a stranger. You can pretend to want them for friends. They will not be so much on their guard with you as they might be with the others. If they should come in while we are talking"—he raised a warning hand—"you must say that we merely have been discussing the storm and your rescue. Nothing more. You understand?"

"Yes." But Gene's voice was dubious. "I can't say that I like this idea of—of murder, though. You must give me time. I want to see them, Kaspel and the princess. I want to be sure."

"You fool! Didn't I tell you to trust me? You doubt my word?" Froar squared his shoulders, his eyes blazing, no trace of kindness on his face.

"It's not that I doubt you—only—I'm not the killer sort. I can't do this sort of thing. But if I could see with my own eyes, then I'd be certain."

"I see." Froar arose and peered out of a window, his face cold with thought. The door swung open again and an inconspicuous man in black entered with a tray of food which he carried to the bed.

"I saw that you were awake, and I went to bring food," the man in black murmured, waiting until Gene had dragged himself up into sitting position. He set the tray on Gene's lap and obsequiously patted the pillows behind Gene to make him more comfortable, then began to lift the chased metal lids from the dishes. "Here is bread—and stewed meat, fruits, and wine." He tilted a bulbous bottle over a cup and the red wine gurgled out. The servant glanced anxiously at Froar. "Shall I go?"

Froar nodded without turning. The man in black peered uncertainly at the two men and withdrew.

"One of Kaspel's spies," Froar said. "He was probably beside you all night. I came when I saw him leaving the room. And now he's seen me here. Too bad." He sighed, then abruptly turned.

Gene was sampling the round crust of bread. "Have you tasted the meat?"

"No—there doesn't seem to be any fork, any eating implement," Gene explained.

"Use your fingers, of course! Do you like the wine?"

Gene touched the cup to his lips. "It's good, thanks."

"I can make it better." Froar dipped a heavy hand into the breast folds of his red coat and drew out a tiny glass cylinder of golden green liquid. He unscrewed its lid and, leaning over the bed, poured a few drops into Gene's cup. "There, see how you like that. Too bad that Kaspel's man had to come in just then," he added as though to himself, replacing the lid on the vial and restoring it into his robe.

Gene lifted the cup to his mouth. Froar said, "Drink it—drink it all." Gene tasted the wine. It was peculiarly fragrant now, as though scented with decaying flowers. He sipped a little of it, his lips and mouth tingling strangely. "Drink it," Froar repeated. "Drink it all before the effect wears off." His voice was commanding; he stood over Gene, his legs spread, his hands behind his back, his eyes glittering enigmatically.

The sensation in Gene's mouth was the same as that experienced when one's hand or foot falls asleep. He was not quite sure whether he liked it, and coughed, spilling a little of the wine. But Froar's stance was insistent, and he obediently put the cup to his mouth. Then Froar turned quickly toward the door, muttering a soft curse. Voices drifted from the passageway—the girl's and that of the man in blue. Interested, Gene forgot the drink and lowered the cup. Froar's head snapped in his direction; the man in red pointed forcefully at the wine.

The tingling had spread from his mouth to his throat; Gene set down the cup as Siwara and Kaspel entered. The girl stretched out her hands in greeting to Froar as though he were a dear friend; he gripped her slender fingers briefly and released them.

"I see that our foundling is awake," Kaspel said before the others could speak. His mild voice was querulous with suspicion. "Rather late for your breakfast," he said, and smiled at Gene.

He was anything but sinister. This gentle-faced old man was planning to sink the ship before it reached Koph? It seemed hardly possible. Certainly, Froar with his hard face and voice was potentially dangerous, though the young princess did not appear to think so. She beamed at the red-coated man and moved over to the bed with a motion less walking than floating. Her slim hands touched the dishes. Froar hurried to her side with long, deliberate steps.

"You haven't eaten much," she said shyly. "We shouldn't have disturbed you while you were eating. But I was worried about you . . you were so ill last night! The servant said that you moaned as you slept—"

Gene nodded. The tingling was all over him now, and his lips had become numb. He opened his mouth to speak but his throat had become hoarse. Froar glanced covertly at Kaspel, who was frowning, and lifted Gene's cup.

"Perhaps it's a relapse," he said. "This wine will clear his throat." As he lifted the cup it slipped from his fingers and clanked down on the rug, the wine soaking into the deep nap. "Careless!" Froar remonstrated with himself, not at all perturbed. "Now I've spilled it!"

The girl's eyes were on Gene, worried; she clasped her hands together and turned to Kaspel. The tingling in Gene's throat was becoming numbness. His muscles had become too loose to control and he sank back—with infinite slowness, he felt—against the pillows.

"You're wanted out on deck," Kaspel said to Froar, who glanced at Gene, nodded at the princess in farewell, and went out. Kaspel watched him go, then whipped a kerchief from his coat and bent down over the spilled wine, sopping it up. The princess turned from her dismayed scrutiny of Gene to watch him.

"Why, Kaspel, what are you doing? One of the servants will clean it—"

Kaspel arose as quickly as age would allow him. He thrust the handkerchief at Siwara's face. "Smell it!" he exclaimed with pallid vindictiveness. "Vyras—poison! I thought I scented it when we came in. Froar's poisoned him!"

She took the handkerchief and dabbed it to her nose. "It does smell like Vyras," she agreed, wonderingly. "But to say that Froar—"

"You never will believe me!" Kaspel muttered angrily, bending over Gene. He shook the man. "He's unconscious. The cup wasn't very empty. He probably didn't drink enough to kill him." He settled the limp body of the man down under the covers and patted them in place over him.

But Gene was not unconscious; his mind was clear and he could hear everything that the two said. Temporarily, he was paralyzed by the potion that Froar had dropped into the wine.

"I don't see why you must blame Froar for this," Siwara said. "What could be his motive?"

Kaspel turned from the bed to her. "I don't know—but I'd like to find out. I'm going to stay by this man until he recovers, and then I'm going to question him. Evidently he knows something that Froar would rather we didn't."

"Why must you hate Froar so, just because you two can't agree politically? You disappoint me, Kaspel. I thought you were a stronger character than that."

"I live only for the State," Kaspel replied with

calm pride. "My life is dedicated to the welfare of Nanich. I am an old man; my wife and children are dead. I am consoled for their loss by the thought of what I can do for others. Siwara, you must not go to Koph! Froar is using you for a tool, I'm certain of it! Turn back before it's too late!"

"No," she said, "I won't. Kaspel, I can't. Do you think I want to go to Koph and bargain with the war lords? But Nanich can't possibly survive another war. I must do everything that I can to maintain peace."

Kaspel groaned softly. "Better for Nanich to give up every last one of its lives than pay tribute to Koph! Why can't I make you understand that once we submit to Koph, Nanich will lose its identity? It will mean the end of our system—no more schools, no more research, only economic slavery, turning out the products that Koph dictates to us. Our young men will become slaves in the fields. Our women will be taken from us to Koph—"

"It can't be that bad," Siwara protested. "Besides, it won't hurt to try to arrange a treaty. If Koph doesn't keep to it—then we can make war."

Kaspel's voice arose. "Oh, Siwara—you utter child! I thought, when your father died and you took the throne, that here was a princess who was fit to govern her people. Go ahead, then—make your treaty. You think the war lords won't trick you? They'll send men across the water to Nanich . . . oh, yes, peaceful traders and the like. And then when you realize that you've been fooled it will be too late—the men from Koph will have seen to that. There'll be no war then, only a small rebellion, crushed by Koph. And for the rest of your life you'll remember what I'm saying now and regret that you didn't do something about it—"

Siwara's small foot tapped impatiently. "But what has all this to do with Froar?"

Kaspel threw his hands up in despair. "Froar loves Koph and all it stands for. He ridicules our schools; he doesn't like the idea of a literate people, because to be literate—at least in Nanich—is to be enlightened. And you can't wring wealth from an enlightened people. Froar wants his pleasures now. He's afraid that he won't live to see the day when Nanich's people have achieved a community wealth. He doesn't want to endure the hardships of our struggle toward a democratic prosperity. Not he!"

Siwara turned away. "You'll never succeed in convincing me. You may as well stop trying."

Kaspel mused over Gene. "This man may hold the argument which will convince you. He must know something of importance—or Froar wouldn't have wanted to be rid of him."

The girl looked down on the man in the bed. "It is strange," she murmured. "I still don't believe that Froar tried to poison him. But someone did. Why? Does someone on board know him and hate him?" She sighed. "I'm tired of being a princess just now. I'm going out in the air—perhaps my maid will sing for me. You stay here and attend to this man, Kaspel. When you have learned his secret, let me know. Then we will see about turning back to Nanich." She touched the old man's shoulder affectionately and drifted out of the room, her scarfs trailing in the air behind her.

Kaspel looked after her, his face sad. He shook his head ruefully then went across the room to pull up a chair beside the bed and wait for Gene's recovery. He sat hunched over, his hands folded on his knees.

The ship swayed gently.

III.

"What did Froar say to you?" Gene was awake now, and Kaspel bending over him, questioning. Beyond the little windows daylight was fading to tender rose.

Gene reflected. What should he say? Well—why not tell the truth? "He wanted me to kill you!"

Kaspel smiled wryly. "I expected that. But why did he want you to die?"

"I haven't been asleep," Gene said. "I lay there unable to move or talk, but I heard all that you and Siwara said. Now I know how things are . . . or I think I do. Froar said that you'll sink this ship before it can reach Koph."

Kaspel nodded solemnly. "True. And if I cannot sink the ship, I will kill Siwara, much as I love her. The people of Nanich must never know Koph's power. They have lived free; they must die free. Siwara does not understand."

"Before your men rescued me, another ship passed me by," Gene furthered. "Froar became very excited when I told him about it. The sail was striped red and yellow, and there were no lights aboard though it was dark. He told me not to tell you."

"Yet you do tell." Kaspel raised his brows. "You don't know that you're risking your life with every word. Froar wishes my death—half the men on this ship are loyal to him. The other half are probably—note that I only say probably—loyal to Siwara and me. Froar's death would be of no use to me, or I would have him slain. But it would not turn Siwara back: it would make her the more stubborn."

He sat down on the chair, leaning forward, his fingers interlaced. "You've no idea of the hazards of this voyage. There have been so many little accidents—at least, they are explained as accidents—on both sides, mostly mine. Sometimes almost

fatal accidents. But my men are watchful. All of us keep our eyes open."

He lifted his head from contemplation of his folded hands and gazed at Gene. "So Froar didn't want me to know about the ship. That's strange. There are always boats going to Nanich from Koph, and from Koph to Nanich. Why should one boat worry Froar? Unless—"

He arose and stalked back and forth across the room, his hands clasped behind him, his sad face chilly with meditation. "Unless we are secretly being followed! There we have it! That explains why the vessel was without lights so that we could not see it!"

He stopped still, staring at the rug. "Froar is afraid that I will persuade Siwara to turn back! He won't let us turn back! If we change the course he will signal to the following ship to attack us. He intends that Siwara reach Koph at any cost—just as I intend that she shall not! And that is why he wanted to kill you. He was afraid he couldn't trust you—he knew that I'd be suspicious when I'd heard that he'd visited you!"

He shook a warning forefinger at Gene. "Young man, from now on your life is in danger. I hold no rancor against you, who might become an ally of mine. When we reach Koph I don't know what will happen to you unless Siwara can be wheedled into protecting you—and she'll be needing protection herself. Froar's apt to drop in here at any time. If he does, pretend that you haven't awakened. Don't admit that you've talked to me—"

Gene leaned on an elbow. "But you would kill Siwara?"

"Not unless absolutely necessary. Why, I love the child—I love her dearly! Her father was my friend. But hers is only one life—the people of Nanich are many. I am a gentle old man. My heart sickens at the thought of bloodshed, but if I must—yes, I will kill her."

He hurried to the bedside. "But you! Your coming has been most providential! Who you are doesn't matter. Siwara is attracted to you. At least she pities you for your sufferings. Her sympathies are open to you. You're not bad-looking; you're young and look strong. Make her love you! That's her trouble—she's never known love. If she loved you and were afraid for you, she might want to turn back! Yes"—he gestured futilely—"and then we'd have Froar's spy ship to contend with! Well, if nothing else it would be the clean death of battle and not Koph's slavery. And Siwara would realize then Froar's treachery."

He cocked his head, listening. "Lie back!" he whispered. "Someone's coming!" Gene settled down and closed his eyes. Kaspel stooped over him, deftly tucking in the covers.

Froar entered and sauntered to the bed. "Still asleep?" He clucked his tongue. "Poor lad! The sea was cruel to him."

Kaspel turned. "Let's drop guile, Froar!" Their eyes clashed. "I know that you put Vyras into his wine. I could detect its odor. Obviously you wanted to be rid of him—as you'd like to be rid of me."

Froar's hard face softened in a contemptuous smile. "Kaspel, you amaze me with your suspicions! Am I not your friend? Don't we dine together every evening with Siwara in her cabin? And have I once attempted to poison you?" His harsh voice had become almost silken.

"No," Kaspel said, "but you take me for walks about the ship—and a bit of tackle falls from the rigging, or I nearly tumble down the narrow stairway."

Froar's smile subsided. "At least we know where we stand now."

"Yes—we do." They traded glances of dislike.

"Well!" Froar bent over Gene brusquely. "So the young man shows no signs of awaking. How sad!" His tone was jubilant. "When he does awake he may have an interesting story to tell you. I was talking to him just before his . . . ah, unfortunate relapse . . . and the poor fellow was quite delirious. He had endured so much, you know, that his mind was not quite clear. He seemed to have seen another ship than ours—one without lights in the night." He gazed down almost affectionately at Gene. "In his anxiety he probably mistook a distant cloud for a ship—it's quite plausible! He says that his name is Gene—a peculiar name—and that he comes from a city named New"—he hesitated over the words—"New York. You can see that he's fairly mad. A shame, too, for one so young!" He shook his head in mock sorrow. He stood back and Kaspel approached the bed.

"He'll probably not awake for a long time," Kaspel said. "The Vyras is strong. You were wise in choosing a drug without antidote."

"I didn't want to add an insane man to our troubles," Froar said unctuously. "If he revives I suppose that he will be in your care."

"In Siwara's," Kaspel amended. "You may as well go, Froar. He won't awake for a long time yet."

"You're so certain," Froar purred. "But I will wait for a time. I have nothing of importance to do." He sat down on the chair near the bed. "Why don't you go, Kaspel? I'm sure you're tired from your vigil."

"Thanks, but I'll stay," Kaspel said hastily, and dragged another chair to the bed. "I don't trust you alone with this man, this Gene. He might become violently active after I go—and then of course in subduing him you might accidentally kill him."

"For an old man your perception is acute,"

Froar smiled. There was a silence. Gene stirred uncomfortably but did not open his eyes.

Froar said, "It would be interesting, now, if this youth were not really as insensible as we think him—if he were listening to everything that we say. But, as you see, he is not aware of us."

He waved toward Gene. "Would it not be interesting if he could hear us talking now, and make his choice. To follow you, or to follow me. Which course would he take? Would he go with you, eager for your rewards of schooling and near-poverty all his life, or would he go with me to greatness and wealth and power over the lives of men? An interesting thought, Kaspel. But, of course, the young man sleeps." He smiled a shade too comprehendingly.

He arose, bundling the rigid folds of his robe around him. "Well, I will go. Poor delirious fellow." There was a threat in his words. "I wonder what will become of him when we reach Koph?" He tossed his head carelessly, the ragged locks of his hair bristling. "Don't stay too long, Kaspel. Remember, Siwara is expecting us to dine with her!" He strode out of the cabin.

Kaspel peered after him, annoyed. Then he turned to the bed. "All right," he said to Gene. "You heard. You can't stay neutral. You've got to make your choice between us. What will you do?"

Gene looked at the door as though Froar were still there. He hesitated. "I'll go with you and Siwara," he said.

"Good!" Kaspel laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. "Come now, get out of bed. Stand up and try to walk. I must see if you are strong enough to be left by yourself. There's no telling what may happen when I'm gone, even though I leave a man to guard you. Gene, he called you. That's your name? Come Gene; arise and walk."

Gene folded back the coverlets and gazed embarrassed at his nakedness. Kaspel hurried to one of the large chests, forced up its heavy lid and rummaged around in it. He brought out a bundle of blue fabric and tossed it to the bed. "Here's something to wear," he said, closing the chest.

Gene slipped into the robe. "It feels strange," he said, "like an old-fashioned nightgown."

Kaspel thrust out an impatient palm. "Never mind. You'll grow used to it. Come—stand up." Gene deserted the bed. "How do you feel? Well? Let me see you walk."

Gene took a few steps over the deep rug, turned and walked back. "I feel all right, but I'm hungry."

"I'll have food sent in. Yes, you seem able to take care of yourself—but just to be sure, I'll send in two men. One to watch the other, both to watch you." He stroked his chin thoughtfully, the wide sleeve of his robe falling back and disclosing his

bony forearm. "You must repay me for these precautions. You must make Siwara love you."

"I don't know if I can do it," Gene said. "I can try. When do I see her?"

"Tomorrow—I'll bring you together out on deck. And now I must go. Be alert!"

Gene nodded, and Kaspel hurried from the little room. Gene stepped over to the windows and peeped out of them. Dusk was flooding the sea. Soon the lamp must be lit. He lifted a bare foot, eyed it with distaste, and went to the chest from which Kaspel had taken the blue robe. In it, after much searching, he found a pair of sandals and slipped them on, buckling their straps across his insteps. They were a little large, but they would suffice.

He picked up the bow from the top of another chest and slipped its loose end of cord over the horns. He twanged the string, drew an arrow from the sheath, and fitted it, took aim. He nodded in satisfaction. He was not familiar with archery, but this was evidently a very good bow. He'd like to try shooting at something. He pulled on the arrow but did not let it fly.

He was aiming in the direction of the door and two men entered, one with a tray of food. They were in the black livery of the servant who had brought breakfast. They stopped still, gaping. Sheepishly, Gene lowered the bow.

"We mean no harm," the man with the tray said. "Kaspel told us to guard you." He advanced to the bed and set the tray down on it.

Gene laid away the bow and arrow. "I was just trying it out," he explained, approaching the bed. He raised the lids from the dishes. There was warm bread, a fillet of fish garnished with pickled fruits, and wine. Gene sat down and sniffed the dishes. There was no hint of the Vyras odor of decaying flowers, but he ate sparingly and without relish. The men sat in the chairs, silently watching him.

When he was done one of the men carried away the tray and returned. Gene glanced from one expressionless face to the other and shifted uneasily. "How long will this voyage take?" he asked.

"Three or four days more," one of the men replied. "Kaspel would rather that we did not talk to you."

"I know, but it's a strain having to sit here and not say anything," Gene said.

The man nodded, but did not speak. Gene went to one of the windows and peered out. The vibrating sky was purple.

One of the men arose and unhooked the lamp from its bracket. He produced a small pair of tongs from his wide girdle and pressed the ends together. A spark spat from the tongs to the wick of the lamp and the room was yellowed by the glowing flame. He returned the lamp to its support.

Gene watched the first stars take their posts in the sky and then went back to the bed. He lay down, not sleepy, but bored. He stared at the embroidered bed canopy, pondering; the lamp's flare was bright on his face and he closed his eyes to rest them.

Time passed. How much—one hour? Two? He did not know. Drowsily he half opened his eyes. One of the men was nodding in his chair and the other—what had become of the other? As he pushed himself up on an elbow to look, a hand with a knife swept down, driving the knife deep into the bedding where his chest had been. His heart tumbling topsy-turvy, he jerked around. The missing man was behind the bed, his eyes guiltily wide, his mouth sagging with dismay. He snatched the dagger out of the covers and drew back his arm to strike again. Gene scrambled off the bed, the man hurrying around it to stab him. The knife swept down and Gene ducked. The thrust missed him and he caught the arm with the knife. The other man awoke with a jerk and gaped stupidly.

The fellow with the knife attempted to wrench his hand from Gene's grasp and Gene held on, his teeth gritting at the effort; his hold was none too good and his fingers were slipping. With his free hand the man caught Gene's throat and Gene dipped down, struggling to break away. But by now the second man was awake. He, too, was intent on the dagger; he forcefully twisted the hand that held it and the knife thudded to the floor.

Gene's assailant darted down to retrieve the knife, but the other man's foot was on it. The stooping man straightened. His gaze was arrogant.

"So," said Gene's rescuer, "you're siding with Frour. I think we ought to see Kaspel about this." He jerked a thumb toward the door. "Come along."

The other smiled insolently. "What good will that do? My word's as good as yours."

"This man will testify for me." Kaspel's loyal retainer nodded at Gene.

"And if I don't choose to go?"

Kaspel's man quickly picked up the knife and flourished it significantly. "Oh, you'll come along all right."

The other considered the knife and shrugged. "Very well, I'll go. You're so faithful now—wait until we reach Koph!"

"I'll serve Kaspel and the princess anywhere—especially in Koph!" The man with the knife motioned to the door. "We'll go now." As the other started out he followed, beckoning to Gene.

They went out down the narrow passage, Gene in the rear, passing several closed doors of carved

and tinted wood. At the end of the hall was another door, on which Kaspel's man knocked. From beyond, Gene heard Siwara's light laughter stilled by the knock. A gnarled old woman in drab costume opened the door and eyed the men wonderingly.

"Come in," Siwara called. She was sitting with Kaspel and Froar on cushions on the floor, a low table before them, its dishes cleared away and a game board on the cloth. "What is it! Why have you brought the sick man here!"

Froar arose, and Kaspel also. The princess toyed with her topaz necklace.

"He tried to kill this man," Kaspel's retainer said, pointing to Gene's attacker.

"Did you?" Kaspel turned to the man, who shook his head.

"It was a personal quarrel," he said. "He was asleep. The sick man crept upon me and tried to choke me. I struck to defend myself."

Gene stepped forward. "That's a lie. Why would I attack you?"

"I told you that he was mad," Froar said, pointing at Gene and turning to the princess.

She scrutinized Gene carefully. "He seems sane enough now. You"—she gestured at the man who was in possession of the knife—"you haven't explained fully. What happened?" She put up both hands to Froar and Kaspel, who assisted her to rise.

"I was inattentive. I might have been dozing. When I opened my eyes they were scuffling. I broke in and took the knife."

The princess thoughtfully raised her necklace to her lips and pressed it against them. "I don't like any of this. Why cannot we fare to Koph as peacefully as on any other voyage? Kaspel, Froar, I think it would be best to lock up these men for the remainder of the trip." Both men lifted their hands in protest, but she disregarded them, gliding over to Gene and standing very near him, her eyes prying up into his. "I'm sure this man's sane. One of you wants to be rid of him, but which one of you?" She scanned Froar's and Kaspel's faces. "I don't know," she said bewilderedly. "I don't know what to think. We're all friends, and yet we're not. I have reasons to mistrust both of you. And I have known both of you for so long that it's hard to think unkindly of you. But I warn you—leave this man alone. He's done no harm, and he's suffered enough already out on the waves. Or does one of you know something about him? Was his rescue a premeditated thing—"

She flirted her hands despairingly. "You see—I'm at my wits' end. I suspect both of you. Let more men guard him tonight—four men, if two aren't enough—and tomorrow I will speak with him."

She turned to Gene. "Poor lad—you are hardly a man yet—perhaps you wish you were back on the sea. I regret these shameful incidents. My hospitality was never so ruffle before. Go back to your sleep without fear." She was not beautiful, perhaps, but her speech and mannerisms were irresistible. Gene stammered as he thanked her; she smiled graciously.

Froar went out with the two men; Kaspel hurriedly joined him, crooking his finger for Gene to follow. Siwara nodded at them, still smiling.

Gene dreamed of her that night.

IV.

Golden sunlight rayed through the cabin's windows. Gene wiped his hands on the towel that one of the men held up for him and turned from the basin of water to put on his blue garment. Kaspel hurried in and drew him aside.

"Siwara's on deck," he murmured urgently. "Remember—if she loves you, we're safe. Are you ready to see her?"

"Just a minute—I want to comb my hair." Gene took the comb from the hands of the man who held it. "I wish you had a mirror here." He combed his hair straight back, trusting that luck would make the effect becoming. He returned the comb and started out with Kaspel. "I was rather worried when one of those fellows started to shave me. I was wondering if he'd cut my throat."

Kaspel's mobile face expressed grim amusement but he did not reply. They went along the passage, opened a door and emerged on deck. For its length the ship was very narrow. There were benches, unoccupied just then, for rowers along the rail. The shimmering sails were bellying in a light wind.

Siwara was seated on an ornate chair near the foremast, her gaunt old maidservant on a cushion at her feet, sewing. The princess was idling through a small but very thick book; she looked up and closed the book with a snap.

"Ah, you've come! Marza, you may go—let the stranger have your pillow." She waved her handmaiden away. The old woman gathered up her sewing and without glancing at Kaspel and Gene, went into the girl's rooms. "Kaspel, you needn't stay if you've something better to do—I want this man to feel at ease." She shifted her gaze to Gene. "Your name is Gene, they tell me." He remained standing and she pointed to the cushion at her feet. Gene sank down on it; Kaspel waited until he was settled, bowed discreetly and walked away.

"I'm tired of reading," Siwara said petulantly, touching the book. "Only the pictures are interesting."

"May I see it?" Gene raised a hand; she gave him the book. He could not decipher the columns of peculiar scratches that filled its pages. The

illustrations were delicate woodcuts. "Printed," Gene commented.

"What did you expect, an illuminated manuscript? From what sort of world do you come? Its arts must be very advanced, if you think us so backward. Perhaps you are from one of the rumored isles far out to sea. Or you may be mad, as Froar claims."

"Siwara . . or should I call you princess . I don't think that I belong anywhere in this world." Gene held up the book. "I can't read this print, but I can understand what you are saying, though your way of speaking seems different."

"Froar says that you speak with your thoughts," she answered.

"That's telepathy, and I was never able to do it back home, I know," Gene said. "I think there's another explanation. The sky here, the very air, is different than I remember it before. It seems to quiver constantly, as though it's alive with electricity. I've heard somewhere that thoughts are as much a force as electricity. Back home we have machines that can record thought impulses, though they can't record the meaning of the thought itself."

"You can remember now?"

"Yes, quite a lot. It's beginning to come back. For a while I wasn't able to distinguish memories from the things I'd dreamed while I was out on the water. I seem to know my last name, now Trivelli, I think it is but that doesn't sound right. It sounds Italian, and I'm obviously Irish."

She laughed. "If you are speaking with thought it is not quite clear. Italian, Irish, electricity! Perhaps you are mad!" Her smile was indulgent. "If you can make your thoughts clear by speech, can you not direct them my way and make them understood without speech?" He raised his brows, uncertain. "Try it."

He frowned a thought at her.

"Were you trying?" she asked. He bent his head assentively. "I heard nothing. Try again." But his efforts were useless.

"No," she said. "Now, I think you're a native of Koph. You dreamed something while you were in torture on the water and you think it was real. You can't read, and everyone in Nanich can read," she said proudly. "Our schools are wonderful. So you must be from Koph, where learning isn't considered important. How did you get out on the water? Try to recall."

He dropped his gaze to the planking. "I was swimming," he said slowly, struggling with memories. "Coney Island—that's it. I went out a little too far; I thought that I could get back, but I couldn't. The undertow dragged me out. I kicked around, trying to get back to the surface, and couldn't. It was horrible, and the water was very cold. Then—suddenly—I was falling through blueness, down to another ocean, very far down. The shock, when I hit, must have stunned me. After that came nightmares—horrible things were chasing me, squeezing my chest with chains and drinking my blood. And then I found myself on the raft. I must have climbed on it without knowing."

Her eyes were fixed on a visionary point. "You fell, you say. There is an old legend of sailors seeing people falling from the sky, but they were dead when the ships reached them. The bodies were brought to Koph and then buried. One of the bodies had a ring on its fingers—the prince of Koph wears it now. But it was spoken of only as an old tale, and the ring might have been made by one of Koph's artisans—though their jewelers are nowhere as clever as ours," she finished patriotically.

She returned her eyes to him. "Perhaps it was a true tale! It sets me to wondering—what kind of a doorway could you have fallen through? A door through time? Not into the past—for you say you knew nothing of Koph and Nanich. A door which was a flaw in the elements which make your world and this? Who knows? Have you such tales in the place from which you came?"

"A lot of them," he said. "A man named Charles Fort compiled books of them, but I can't remember them much. Everyone's heard of rains of fishes and frogs, and sometimes there are dust storms miles away from desert areas. Several centuries ago a woman appeared in England who spoke a language that no one understood—I think that she was exploited as having come from Mars."

"England—Mars!" she repeated. "Tell me aobut this world of yours. Are you a prince there? No? But you have princes?"

"After a fashion."

"What are your cities like? Do you live in peace? And the women—are they beautiful? What do they wear?"

When he had answered these questions, she asked, "And what are your weapons of war? Are you proficient with them?"

"We use guns," he said. "An exploding powder propels little pellets of lead through a metal tube. No, I've never shot a gun except at a shooting gallery. We have airships, too—great things that fly like birds through the sky and drop bombs—containers of explosive powder that are capable of great destruction—"

She drew back, her eyes horrified. "Magic?" she asked.

"No, not magic. Science."

She shook her head slowly, the horror lingering in her eyes. "It sounds like magic," she murmured. Then, regretfully, "Ah, if only we had a little of that magic on the side of Nanich!

There'd be little need of bargaining with Koph." She leaned down to him, and her face was very lovely with hope. Unconsciously he raised his face a little toward hers, enthralled by another kind of magic—the magic of her femininity. She did not appear aware.

"Could you tell Kaspel how to make one of these weapons! If the forges of Nanich were put to your uses—could you make these weapons?"

Her words startled him out of his trance. He drew back, biting his lip. "I'm afraid not, Siwara. I'm just a very ordinary person. I worked in an office. What chance would I have to know about gun making, unless I made it a hobby? And I didn't," he added mournfully. "When I came home from work, I was so worn out that I spent my time relaxing—seeing picture shows and visiting friends. I'm no mechanical wizard, just a human being."

She jerked away, her lips compressed in vexation. "Now I think you *are* mad! You come to me with lying tales, reviving my hopes—and what good are you? Only a disappointment. Well, here you are without hope of returning to that place from which you say you came. What will you do here? What purpose can you serve for Nanich? Can you fight? Are you a good bowman? Can you wield a sword"

He gestured helplessly. "No—but I can learn."

She laughed with shrill scorn. "You can learn! And by the time your beard is long and gray, you will be as competent as the average young man of Nanich who has been taught swordplay from babyhood!"

"Perhaps I could teach in your schools?" he asked.

"Teach what? The writing of your country? We have only one language here. We need no other. Diverse languages breed diverse viewpoints—and that ends in war."

"You have a postal system? You have skilled office workers? I know that part of life in and out. I think that I could teach your people something."

"Perhaps. We have a postal system—but it's not run by magic," she said.

"I know the principles of a lot of machines back home. I don't know their actual workings, but if I told some of your wise men, they might be able to fill the gap."

She thought about that. "Yes, that's true—but hardly enough to turn this ship back from Koph. I don't want to go; I'm frightened. But I must go. How I feel doesn't matter; I must do what I think is right for my people. Kaspel insists that I turn back, and I am beginning to think that he speaks wisely." She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know."

On the upper deck roofing the cabins, Froar had appeared. He leaned on the rail, the breeze rippling his red garment. His hands were folded on the rail, and he was evidently interested only in the sea—but occasionally his hard eyes slipped from the water and down to the mast-foot where Gene and the princess were sitting.

Siwara was interested in the customs of Gene's world, and questioned him at length. Then they delved into history.

"And from what period of your history do you think Koph and Nanich might come?" she asked.

"Five or six hundred years ago," he replied. "Just before the invention of gunpowder. Odd that your people never invented trousers. I don't like this bathrobe." He touched his blue coat.

"Trousers? Oh, yes—you say that even your women wear them; I take it that slacks are the same as trousers?" He dipped his head for answer. "I must have you describe them to Marza, my maid; she will make me a trial set." She reached down with her hand, and he took it, his heart accelerating—but she merely wanted her book. She arose, and he scrambled to his feet.

"I must go within now. Roam the ship as you will. I do not think that further harm will come to you." She smiled slightly in farewell, and headed for the cabins, her soft gown pressed against her by the wind, limning the slim contours of her lithe body. Gene waited until she had disappeared through the doorway, then seated himself in her chair.

Froar had continued his earnest surveillance of the water until Siwara had gone. Now he turned, frankly staring at Gene, his face mockingly pleasant. He waved to Gene, summoning him, but Gene shook his head.

"Afraid of me?" Froar derided. "Didn't the princess say that no harm could come to you? Why be frightened?"

"I'm not frightened," Gene said, flushing.

"No? Then come up here." Froar beckoned again, and after a second's hesitation, Gene ascended the steep and narrow stairs to the higher deck. Froar turned back to his contemplation of the waves, and Gene approached him.

"So you've decided in favor of Kaspel," Froar murmured without looking back. He sensed Gene's affirmative jerk of the head. "I'm truly sorry that I tried to poison you, but there seemed nothing else to do at the time. Kaspel's man had seen me talking with you—and I hadn't thought of explaining that first ship you saw as the invention of madness. They're not sure of you yet," Froar said, "Kaspel and the princess. Don't trust them too far. You may regret it."

The wind disturbed his graying hair, and he pushed the straying locks firmly back in place.

"Yes, enjoy yourself now," he said. "You have so little time left for enjoyment. Soon we arrive in Koph—and then—" He flirted a finger across his throat suggestively.

His words held no immediate threat. "When do we reach Koph?" Gene asked.

"In three days more," Froar said indifferently. Suddenly he stiffened, his eyes wide on the water. What did he see? Gene pressed against the rail, his eyes sweeping the water.

"You noticed it, too?" Froar asked excitedly, pointing straight to the horizon. "I wasn't sure that my eyes weren't tricking me!" Gene squinted at the far swells. "Yes, now you see it, don't you? Straight ahead—"

Then suddenly Froar's hands had grasped Gene firmly about the waist; he shoved. Gene clutched at the rail, or he would have slipped overboard. At the same time he kicked Froar in the shin. Froar jerked his hands away, his face darkening with pain and frustration. The expression faded away; he was urbane again. He lounged against the rail as though nothing had transpired, but now Gene stood back from the balustrade, alert and indignant.

"Yes, I meant to push you overboard," Froar remarked with engaging frankness, as Gene turned to go. "Too bad that I didn't succeed. But maybe I will—later."

"Or I'll push *you*," Gene said, surprised at his own daring. It was the first time that he had actually considered murdering a man. He fancied a change in himself already. What was this strange voyage doing to him? And how was it to end?

V.

Kaspel's stateroom was similar to Gene's; its walls were brass-hinged cupboard doors pebbled by tiny carvings. There was the same sort of wide low bed, the backless armchairs and immense carved wooden chests. Shields on the walls pendulated with the ship's swaying, grating over the ornamental reliefs. Spears and bows lay across brackets from which hung quivers of arrows. The windowpanes were rosy squares against the sunset's light.

Kaspel was seated in a chair, his long fingers gripping its arms, his deep face bland with thought. His blue robe sagged from his shoulders as though beneath it his body were a framework of sticks.

Gene stood before him, recounting his conversation on deck with Princess Siwara, and Froar's ruse to push him overboard. "Froar said that we'll land in Koph in three days," he concluded.

Kaspel's eyes lifted to Gene's face and regarded him an instant, then wandered back to the floor. He moistened his lips nervously. "Three days!" He panted a short laugh. "The third day doesn't count—we'll be in sight of Koph all that third day. We can't turn back then." He shook his head slowly at some thought.

Gene chose a chair and sat down. "It's easy to talk of making Siwara love me, but the time's too short. People can't love each other in just a few days."

Kaspel awoke from his reverie and raised his brows humorously. "No? Young man, I didn't meet my wife until the day we were married, and we lived happily together for thirty years until her death. If you want Siwara to live—get her to love you, and turn back to Nanich. If you can't do that, and she dies—you will be more her murderer than the hand which kills her."

Gene writhed uneasily. "Kaspel, how can you sit there and cold-bloodedly speak of murder? Back where I come from, we didn't kill—we didn't think it was civilized, and we weren't allowed to escape punishment if we did it or even tried."

"We have laws here, too," Kaspel said. "But this is outside any laws made for individuals; this involves the destiny of a nation. Ah, if only you had seen Nanich? Rude, yes, compared to the splendors of Koph—splendors obtained through the miseries of serfdom! But glorious in its freedom, its enlightenment, its will to progress! The longer we wait, fending Koph's advances with treaties that Koph will not observe, anyway, the longer time we allow Koph to prepare. Siwara plans to pay tribute to Koph: she won't suffer for it, but the lives of countless Nanich men and women will be altered for the worse, and the lives of their children. Siwara would stop the building of fortifications on Nanich to demonstrate her good will—and Koph will attack suddenly—and where will Nanich be?"

He put a hand to his forehead and shook his head pettishly as though it ached. "Siwara's fate is in your hands! She likes you—she's a frank person; you'd have known soon enough if she hadn't found you pleasant. Well—be still more pleasant. She's invited you to dine with us tonight. That's a good sign."

He took his palm from his brow, replacing it on the chair arm as he turned his head to crane out of the little windows.

"Sundown," he said. "She will be expecting us within a few moments. Shall we go?" He arose, and Gene stood also. "One minute." He waved for Gene to wait, and stalked over to one of the chests, lifted its heavy lid, and withdrew a short knife from it. He shut the lid and slipped the knife into his girdle. "Perhaps you should be armed, too. Neither of us is safe on this ship until the third day, when Koph is in sight. Then Froar will no longer consider us a menace." He laughed again, unpleasantly. "Little he knows!" But he made no move toward procuring Gene a knife.

Kaspel peered down at his robe critically, smoothed its folds becomingly and motioned for Gene to accompany him. They stepped out into

the narrow little hall, proceeded to Siwara's door. Kaspel knocked, and the maid Marza opened the portal to the two men. Siwara was leaning against the one large window of her suite; its pane was open, and the sea breeze was playing with her hair. The fabric of her gown was so light that it floated in air at the slightest motion; she might have been wrapped in tendrils of yellow steam.

She turned to greet them. "Good evening, Kaspel. Good evening, Gene." Her eyes were soft on them. "Shall we wait for Froar?" In the center of the room, four large cushions lay about a low table on the floor. The maid Marza crept in and out of an anteroom with dishes for the table, inconspicuous in her black dress.

Siwara pointed out to sea. "Have you seen the sunset? It's glorious. The sky's so clear, so quiet. Look!" She made room for them to peer out. She was on one side, Kaspel on the other, Gene in the middle.

Gene glanced at her from the side of his eye. She had been watching him; she diverted her gaze. He turned his head and frankly stared at her. In the last rosy rays of the sun her skin was luminously pale. How small and delicate she was!

She sensed his ardor. "But you're not looking at the sea," she reproved him gently, then turned from the window. "It's clear now, but I suppose it will be stormy again before we reach Koph. This is no time to be out on the sea. It's *Lakta* season—what you would call winter, the time of storms. No, if this were merely a pleasure voyage, we wouldn't be making it now. Few ships are out to sea at this time of year. I think that even now the wind is strengthening."

Kaspel was as rapt upon the sinking sun as though he were seeing it for the first time. Gene realized that Kaspel was hinting for him to become amorous. He opened his mouth to speak, but there was such a choice of openings in his mind that he was perplexed about which to utilize. He closed his mouth miserably.

Siwara was bending over the table, rearranging the dishes which her maid had placed upon it. Kaspel seized the opportunity to turn and frown a command at Gene, who swallowed hard and stammered, "Siwara—"

She arose dutifully. "Yes?"

"I've told you all about my country and its customs. Why don't you tell me about yours? How do the people make make love, for instance?"

She seemed slightly annoyed; then her eyes softened. "One of our customs is never to ask about love," she said. "We don't speak of it—it's too sacred. We do it without talk—"

There was a rap on the door, and before they could turn to it, Froar stepped in, resplendent in glossy scarlet silk. He closed the door, folded his arms, and surveyed the company, his lips smiling, but his sharp eyes cold on Gene, who returned the stare defiantly. The maid Marza had appeared at the doorway to the adjoining room at Froar's entrance; she disappeared and returned with a steaming caldron of soup which she ladled out into small cups, set the caldron on the table and retired from the chamber.

"Shall we be seated?" Siwara asked, sinking down to her cushion. "You, Froar, on my left, and Kaspel on my right, as usual. And you, Gene, opposite me."

They settled on the cushions. Siwara daintily lifted her cup and tasted the soup. The men sipped the steaming liquid.

Froar turned his head to the princess. "Did Gene tell you that I announced the end of our voyage. We'll reach Koph in three days."

The princess shook her head. "No. We're making good progress then, aren't we?"

Froar's eyes swung to Gene almost affectionately. "Then he's not a talebearer," he said jestingly.

Toward the end of the meal, the curtains of the window were flapping in the wind, and a corner of the tablecloth lifted and was blown across the dishes.

"Will you shut the window?" the princess asked no one in particular. Both Froar and Gene arose, but Froar was nearest the window; he stared out at the black night sky and its stars before swinging shut the pane. "The wind's rising," he said thoughtfully.

Siwara glanced over her shoulder to him. "I hope that doesn't mean we're going to have another storm," she complained, her soft voice transforming her words into a pretty speech. "I don't want any more delay. I want to reach Koph as soon as possible and get this hateful business finished. Will the wind be with us, do you think, or against us?"

Froar returned to the table. "With us, I think," he said, sitting again. The princess turned her eyes from Gene's shyly ardent scrutiny, and then looked back at him, smiling, amused. He lowered his gaze bashfully, and felt the reproachful nudge of Kaspel's foot against his.

Someone tapped on the door; Marza hurried in to open it. One of the black-robed crew was outside, the skirt of his long robe drawn into his waistband until its hem hung to his knees.

"Pardon," he gasped, as though the sight of the princess frightened him. "I come for the minister Froar—it is an emergency—" He cowered as though expecting the red-cloaked man to hurl something at him, but Froar merely stood up, bowed in excuse to the princess, and hurried out. Marza closed the door upon them.

Kaspel's serious face brooded on the portal. "Something's wrong," he said. "I'd better go,

too." Nodding at the princess, he made his departure.

"More wine?" Siwara bent over the table to fill Gene's glass, the butterfly sleeves of her gown lifting and settling with the movement. Gene lifted a hand to touch her slim wrist, and faltered. Siwara set down the decanter and drew back, smiling. "You would like to make love to me, and you are too shy, is that it?" she asked, her eyes glinting mischievously.

Gene nodded somberly. "The worst of it is, I think I'm really in love with you," he said.

"That's a rather peculiar remark. Don't you wish to love me?" she inquired coquettishly. She colored; her voice became lower. "That wasn't right of me. I ought not have said it. It's best that you don't love me, Gene."

His eyes were puzzled. "Why? Because you're a princess?"

She was earnest. "It's not a question of rank, but of duty. Would you be fit to govern beside me? And you are not from Nanich. I can marry whom I choose, but the people of Nanich would not trust you. And look at you! You do not know how to fight—at least not our way—"

He interrupted her eagerly. "I can use my fists. I'm not a weakling."

"Your fists!" Her tone was derisive. "What use are fists against swords, spears and arrows?"

Something in her disdain prompted him to slip around to Froar's cushion, nearer her.

"I don't like your world," she said. "You're young—but you're not impetuous. You've no confidence in yourself. Your world's ways have done that to you, even as Koph's serfdom crushes the spirits of its youth. The man who can claim me must be resourceful—and daring—"

"What can I do to please you, to prove that I'm not as you think—"

She straightened from her cushion, resentfully, and drifted to the window. He hesitated, then joined her.

"Siwara—"

And then he kissed her well and with a strength that was beyond denial. She yielded for a moment and then pushed against his strong embrace, wrenching herself free. Her wide eyes were indignant.

"As if I could love you!" she cried, so loudly that Marza heard and appeared at the doorway, where she hovered, watching anxiously. "I am not like other women. I cannot love. I am only a puppet of my country, reserved for the coldness of another puppet!" She turned away. The gaunt old handmaiden studied them for another moment, then prudently withdrew.

Gene was as angry as she. That had been a wonderful kiss, arousing a hunger in him for another like it. He strode briskly to her, whirled her around. "I'll make you love me!" And then he kissed her again, fervently. She did not resist. Their mouths were pressed together for a long time. Her hands were on his back, holding him.

Then, as before, she thrust him back, her eyes flinching from his. "This is insupportable! When they dragged you in from the sea, I was sorry for you—sorry because of your youth and the pain which you must have endured. If I had known that my pity would have led to this"—and now she smiled, happy with the thought—"I think that I would have had you thrown back into the waves!"

"Siwara—" His hands were reaching toward her again, but the door banged open, and Froar strode in, his face more rugged than ever in wrath. One flick of his eyes absorbed Gene's yearning and Siwara's refutation; he was preoccupied with more important matters. Behind him Kaspel stalked guiltily, his long face blank with apprehension. Siwara hurried to them; Gene dropped his hands and turned.

"The ship's off course!" Froar rasped, his voice clattering like an iron wheel over cobblestones. "Someone's tampered with the lodestone! I've had enough of this this meddling! I want Kaspel and everyone serving him to be locked up for the rest of this journey!"

Siwara turned to Kaspel, as though to an erring child. "Was it your work?" she asked gently. Kaspel favored her with a fleeting, foolish, frightened smile, and nodded.

She clasped her hands in anger and turned from the two. "Why must we go on like this? Kaspel, why can't you take my answers as final?" The man in blue did not reply. "Froar, I don't blame you for being angry. I'm angry, too, but—" She was obviously about to excuse Kaspel. But Froar cut her short. He pointed to Gene.

"Better put him under lock, too! He's helping Kaspel!"

She whirled furiously on Gene. "Is it true? No, you needn't answer. I might have guessed it." She faced the man in blue. "Kaspel, how could you have done this to me? You told him to love me, didn't you? Had you no consideration for me? Did you think that I would—"

"No consideration at all!" Froar interjected triumphantly. "He'll use any means that he can find to bring an end to this voyage to Koph. Even, my little princess, if it means—killing you!"

She peered up at him now, stamping a small foot in rage. "Froar! Do you know what you're saying?"

His smile was a leer. "Ask him—if you think he'll tell the truth."

She regarded Kaspel, who nodded dumbly, and her mouth parted in horror. She took a step backward, unconsciously toward Gene, then—aware of

him—recoiled from him, too. Marza was at the door again, silently observing.

She tilted back her head in hysterical laughter. "Was ever a woman so meshed in intrigues!" Her laughter thinned away, and she pressed her palms to her face, ashamed at her outburst. All three men stepped forward simultaneously to comfort her, noticed each other and halted, Gene and Kaspel glaring at Froar, his flinty eyes cursing them. At that, Siwara made a gesture of pushing them away. She lowered her hands to her sides and raised her head with dignity.

"I say this to you—from now on all matters concerning the ship are in Froar's hands and the hands of those who serve him." Froar's hard-planed face sharpened with triumph; his smoothing of his coarse gray locks was a gesture of victory. "You, Kaspel"—tears sparkled in her eyes; she brushed them away brusquely—"I can hardly believe that you would want to kill me—not unless I had heard it from your lips. You love me, I know you do. It is not you who would do this, but the demon of your ideals for Nanich. I understand. And what I'm about to say is not from my heart, but from the sense of duty which governs me. For I love you, too, Kaspel. With all my heart. I am grateful for your years of caring for me, of teaching me. But now I am my own mistress."

She paused, panting, as though she was not sure that she could go on. "You must stay in your room, Kaspel." Froar will pick the men who will guard you. If you are not foolish, no harm will come to you—that's so, Froar?"

The man in scarlet nodded.

From without came the faint wailing of wind in the ship's tackle. The floor was beginning to heave under their feet. Siwara moved to a wall and put her hand on it to steady herself, her yellow draperies swirling flamelike.

"And this man?" Froar indicated Gene.

Her lips twisted contemptuously. "He goes with Kaspel."

"Good!" Froar's face wrinkled with satisfaction. He wheeled, signaling the dim faces of the men out in the hall. As their tread approached, Kaspel hid his face under a hand, his back bending with sorrow. Siwara's light fingers touched his shoulder comfortingly.

"And now, Siwara, I say this for your own good. You, too, must be guarded. We are making Kaspel our prisoner, yes"—he fleered at the sobbing man in blue—"but we don't know how long he'll stay our prisoner." The men from the hall were taking hold of Kaspel and Gene. Froar raised his voice for their edification. "We no longer have the assurance that men are loyal to either of us. They may be persuaded by Kaspel to let him free; he may bribe them into mischief. Some of my servants I know are true to me—of the others, I'm not sure. But from now on, anyone guilty of the slightest act against me had better beware! I have your sanction in this?"

She nodded vigorously, also for the benefit of the men.

"So you, Siwara, must remain in your rooms until the voyage is over. I will have supplies sent you, so that none can poison you. And you must not leave your rooms."

"I understand," she acceded gravely.

He motioned to his men; they started to draw Kaspel and Gene into the hall. He stepped closer to Siwara, looming over her. "We'd be short-handed with the crew if we chained the men loyal to Kaspel. If you're wise, you'll ease matters by throwing this Gene overboard from whence he came." His eyes probed hers. She quailed.

"It's not necessary!" She lifted her hands to him, perturbed.

He smiled suavely. "Not unless you're in love with him. Love and politics, Siwara—they don't blend."

Her little face was fierce. "You think I love him! That weakling!" She peered down the hall after Gene, clenching her hands vehemently. "After what Kaspel sent him to do—and he came—you think I care for him?"

"I just wanted to make sure," Froar said, a threat behind his urbanity. He called to his men, "Three of you go with Kaspel into his chamber. He's an old man; he can't hurt you. And the other's like a child. The rest of you stand by the door—I'll have you relieved in a few moments."

He lifted one of Siwara's hands and kissed it. "Good night, my princess."

His manner was so arrogant that Siwara drew back her hand, doubt in her eyes. She motioned to Marza as Froar stepped out; the serving woman closed the door.

The three black-robed men entered Kaspel's stateroom with Gene and the man in blue. Two took posts at the windows; the third stayed by the door. Kaspel shakily sat on the bed.

"No hope of turning back now," he said, while one of Froar's men lit the lamp.

Gene dropped beside him, laying a hand on the man's bent back. "Kaspel, I'm sorry!"

Kaspel coughed feebly. "Poor Nanich!" He shook his head in despair.

The wind was shrill in the rigging outside; waves were drumming on the sides of the ship.

"I hope we sink," said Kaspel.

VI.

The little lamp swung to and fro. Gene lay across the bed on his stomach, his shoulders levered up on his elbows, his chin in his hands. Kaspel, hands nervously twitching in their clasp

behind his back, paced the room, his eyes downcast, his mouth working. The men at the windows looked on indifferently, stealing occasional glances through the windows at the agitated sea. The guard at the door had drawn a chair before the portal, and was seated comfortably, his arms crossed.

Kaspel's head jerked up as though he had reached some important decision; he went to the men at the window. "You must let us out," he said, his gentle voice fretful. "We must get to Siwara at least. There's no danger in our seeing her, is there?" He gestured to the men. "You lads—why, I know you all. Some of you have been servants of the princess for years. Yet now you suddenly turn to Froar. Why, in the name of all the powers? Why?"

The two men at the windows interchanged glances—wary and distrustful. One of them spoke. "Kaspel, do not try to alter our views. We will not listen."

The man in blue hurried close to the one who had spoken, and laid a pleading hand on his shoulder. "You, Miskal—surely you will see reason. If we cannot reach Siwara, cannot turn this ship back, it's the end of Nanich! You don't believe me? Or you don't care? Which?"

The man shook Kaspel's hand from his shoulder.

and drew back. "I told you that I won't listen to you, Kaspel. None of us will. Don't try to argue." He sent his eyes to the other two men, who nodded solemnly.

Kaspel turned away, furious and despairing, his hands clenching into fists. He tottered back and forth, his forehead wrinkling, his teeth gnawing his lips. Once he gazed pleadingly at the man whom he had called Miskal, but the guard shook his head sternly. He resumed his aimless wanderings. Gene lay immobile, his eyes apathetic.

The wind buffeted the ship; it swerved, almost throwing Kaspel off balance. The men standing at the windows clung to the sills for support. Sighing sharply with impatience, Kaspel fell to the bed, leaned huddled, his face almost touching his knees. Was time passing? It hardly seemed so. Minutes had expanded into drab centuries. There was nothing but the pulsing shadows cast by the rocking lamp, the somber stares of Froar's men, the uncertain tossing of the ship.

They heard voices in the hall outside, raised in protest, but the words were indistinguishable. The voices softened to inaudibility. Then someone tried the door. Gene and Kaspel looked up with hope in their eyes. The guard at the door leaped to his feet and pulled his chair out of the way; he drew a poniard from the sheath at his belt and cautiously opened the portal.

One of the men outside looked in. "The princess sent her maid to see Kaspel. We told her to go back. She gave us this note. I thought it would be all right to give it to Kaspel—Froar didn't say anything against it."

The guard at the door took the note. "You read it?" He unfolded the crisp paper, his eyes running along the columns of ideographs. "I don't know. Maybe we ought to send someone up to ask Froar. But, despite what it says, this writing can't do any harm while we're watching."

He folded the note, nodded to the other man, and closed the door, taking the precaution of replacing the chair against it before he delivered the note to Kaspel. He strode stiffly back to the chair and rested on it.

Kaspel's fingers trembled as he jerked the paper flat. His eyes skimmed the brush strokes, widening with wonder and quick joy.

Gene noted the abrupt change in his expression, and leaned against Kaspel's back, staring over his shoulder. "What does it say?" The men at the windows did not step forward, but their necks craned in their interest.

Kaspel read in a low voice, "I have been thinking You were right. A ship from Koph is following us. Froar has been signaling it. Now I would like to turn back. Kaspel, forgive me—" The man in blue broke off to shake his head sadly. "She sees now what my words could not make her see!" He resumed reading the note. "I have told Froar that I must turn back. He laughed. I think that he intends to put me aboard the ship that is following us."

"That's all she said?" Gene asked, intent on Kaspel's face.

The man in blue smiled sadly in reply, and slowly tore the note into tiny fragments. He piled them neatly on a corner of the bed. "Siwara understands—too late!" he groaned.

Gene drew back, his eyes darting sharply about the stateroom. He brightened, as though discovering a means of reaching Siwara, then shook his head. Evidently there was a flaw in the plan. He stared down at the silken bedcover, his eyes narrowing. Suddenly he looked up.

"Kaspel, why is Froar going to Koph?"

Kaspel did not recognize the hint. "What do you mean, why is he going to Koph?"

"No—that's not what I'm trying to uncover. Kaspel, why is Froar so anxious to betray Nanich?"

The man in blue frowned irritably. Before he could reply, Gene hurried along. "Because he wants wealth—that's right, isn't it? And why can't he have wealth in Nanich? Because there everyone is free and equal—it's share and share alike. And Froar isn't man enough to put up with what the others are content to suffer." Gene kept his face turned to Kaspel, but from the corners of his eyes he could see that Froar's guards were listening.

He said, "How does Froar expect to get wealth in Koph?" By betraying Nanich, by wresting his wealth from the hands of the people whom he's betrayed. That shows that he's unscrupulous, that he's concerned only with himself."

His glance swept the guards. "How will he reward these men? You say they're natives of Nanich. In serving him, they show that they have no love for the country of their birth. By serving him, they are cursing the mother that bore them and made them as strong as they are. If they were born in Koph, would they have had the chance to make this choice—the choice of betraying their country? No. From the very start they'd have been bred to servility; they'd never have dared to assert their manhood by making the choice. They would have no manhood. Koph would have seen to that."

Kaspel nodded silently, comprehending now what was in Gene's mind.

Gene's gaze smirched the guards. "Slaves of Koph they would have been! Spies reporting their every word to police—isn't that right? I wonder how many people in Koph would give their lives to utter just one word against the tyrants who are crushing them—I wonder?" He paused to allow his words full effect. "And do these men intend to spend the rest of their lives

under Koph's regime? They must, for this betrayal of Nanich means the downfall of Nanich. They can't go back there. There will be no Nanich!"

He laughed scornfully. "And so they must spend the rest of their lives in Koph. That's amusing. Why are they serving Froar? Because he's offered them great rewards. Perhaps he's given them money or jewels, and promised more. But when they reach Koph, do you think Froar will care? Froar?" Gene laughed again. "Not he!"

The men were very intent on his words. The two at the windows had stepped unthinkingly from their posts, were nearer the bed. The man at the door sat with his mouth open stupidly.

"He has promised them much," Gene said. "And perhaps given them part payment in advance. They dream of wealth and power in Koph. But Froar also dreams of wealth and power in Koph. Everybody can't be rich. The more rich people, the less money to go around." He was speaking directly to the men, now. "Do you see what I mean? Perhaps Froar is well known in Koph. He will run little risk in his climb to greatness. Are any of you men well known?" The guards passed glances of concern to each other, but did not reply. "No, of course not. You will arrive in Koph, simple sailors, or palace servants, or whatever you are. You will have a few jewels. The invasion of Nanich will begin. You will have to fight your own people, or remain in Koph. Your reward from Froar won't last forever—and then what will you do?"

The men were standing beside the bed, looking down on him, fascinated. "How do you know that Froar won't have you imprisoned the very minute this ship docks? Why should he care what becomes of you? You'll have served his purpose. You won't be able to help him much in his mixing in the politics of Koph. You'd only be a drag on him. And Froar is too ambitious to tolerate any hindrance. You know that from what he's tried to do to Kaspel and me.

"So go ahead, you poor fools. Laugh at us now—but you'll very likely sit with us in the same prison in Koph and maybe die with us there, if we die. But perhaps you will die, and we won't. Kaspel is too wise in the affairs of Nanich to be killed outright. They'll need his counsel. And so he will have a certain amount of influence, of freedom in Koph—for a while at least.

"And then you, rotting in prison, will think of him, and wonder why you allowed yourselves to be duped by Froar—and nothing can save you then, not even Kaspel!"

He sat back, panting from breathlessness and anger; the men glanced at each other uncertainly.

"He's right," the one called Miskal said.

The man beside him wriggled unhappily as though something were pricking him. "It's true—we've been blind, unthinking—it's true. Well, Thuir!" He peered over the bed to the man who had been watching the door.

Thuir nodded. "Kaspel, pardon our weakness." He dropped to his knees before the old man. "We'll serve you from now on, Kaspel—and never change."

Kaspel gazed on the eagerly uplifted face. wonder," he said slowly. "I wonder."

All three men were kneeling. "No, Kaspel—we'll fight for you—for you and Nanich! We swear it!"

Joy fought with unbelief on Kaspel's visage. He turned to Gene, and tears glinted in his eyes. He patted Gene's shoulder. "Good lad!" He arose. "Stand up, you three!" His tone had become authoritative. "I accept your fealty—but there's much to be done before we can congratulate ourselves. Thuir, how many men are outside the door?"

"Three."

"Is Lal among them?" Thuir nodded. "Good. We won't have to worry about him. He's one man faithful to me, though he seems to be serving Froar." Kaspel beamed with satisfaction. "The other two?"

Thuir named them. Kaspel stroked his chin, perturbed. "We haven't time to reason with them. Koph is too close, and if we turn back, we'll have to outrun the ship that's following us. Two of you stand behind the door. You call the men in, Thuir—and the two behind the door will attend to them."

The men eagerly started for the door, Gene accompanying them. Kaspel lifted an admonitory hand. "Don't kill them. Merely strike them senseless if you can. Bind them. Gene, where are you going?"

"To help them," Gene said eagerly.

"You come back here to the bed! You must sit here with me and look unhappy, or the men from outside may miss you, and suspect something is wrong as they enter the room. Come here, now." Gene returned unwillingly. Kaspel dropped his hand. "All right, you three—and don't fail!"

The men nodded confidently. Kaspel pulled Gene into the semblance of grief. He sagged into the pose of despair. Two men slipped behind the door. Thuir opened the panel. "Chavik—Clor!" His voice rose excitedly. "Come in here—quick!"

Two men pushed through the door. Before they had hardly crossed the threshold, Kaspel's new retainers had leaped at them, knives drawn. The outsiders threw up defensive hands, and kept them aloft as the daggers of the others tickled their throats. The knives coaxed them farther inside the room.

Kaspel left the bed. "Now call in Lal."

Thuir opened the door again; Lal entered. He evaluated the situation in a twinkling; a grin crossed his face.

"Bind the two," Kaspel ordered. Thuir bustled about the room, tearing down the bed canopy, pushing Gene aside to rip blankets from the bed. He hurried to the men, slit the cloths with a knife and jerked them into strips; he began to tie Froar's men.

"How many are guarding Siwara's door?" Kaspel asked.

"None," Lal said. "We were in the hall—none could come past us."

"Good." Kaspel wheeled on Thuir. "Have you finished with those men? Hurry! Roll them under the bed when you're done. We ought to throw them overboard, but perhaps we can use them later, when we've convinced them of their folly. And I'm not a killer by nature."

The two fettered men, gagged lest they cry out, were tumbled to the floor and shoved under the bed.

"Better give them pillows—make them a little comfortable," Kaspel ordered, his humanity savoring of irony. "So! Now three of you stay out in the hall before the door. If anyone comes, waylay him. If it be Froar himself, bind him and let me know. Miskal, you come with Gene and me to Siwara's cabin."

The men trooped out into the hall, closing the door after them. Thuir, Lal and the third man lingered at the entrance. Kaspel, his hand on Gene's arm, a jerk of his head summoning Miskal, hastened down the hall to Siwara's quarters. He tapped the door with his fingertips.

"Siwara!" he called. "Siwara! Open! It's I—Kaspel!"

There was an instant of waiting; the door flew open, Marza's bright little eyes scanned the men with unbelief. She stepped quickly inside, and they hurried into the room.

Siwara was seated on a heap of cushions below the window, her hair unbound and shimmering in brown tendrils over her shoulders. Her eyes were enormous in her amazement and pleasure. She sped from her cushions across the room to Kaspel and whipped her arms around his neck, kissing him wildly.

"Kaspel! Kaspel, forgive me! I was such a fool—an obstinate, ungrateful fool! Will you ever forgive me?" She was sobbing in her happiness.

Kaspel embarrassedly disengaged her, moisture brightening his eyes. "There, now, little one, I'm not angry with you."

Siwara beamed up at him, her sobs lessening. She glanced beyond him, and saw Gene. She turned away miserably. "But I wish you hadn't brought *him!*" Marza was closing the door.

Kaspel motioned for Gene to approach. "Hush, Siwara, child—it was he who made it possible for us to reach you." Gene thrust out his hands in silent supplication.

Siwara faced them uncertainly. "After the way he . . . he kissed me—" she faltered. "I hate him!" But her eyes were less angry than unsure.

Gene stepped up to her, grasping her arms. She did not pull away. He lowered his face to hers. "Siwara, I was sincere about the kiss. I meant it—Kaspel didn't have to send me to make love to you. I couldn't help myself!"

Her mouth parted slightly; she trembled in his grip. He pressed his lips on hers. At first she did not respond; then her hands slipped, weakly, up his arms and to his shoulders. There was an instant of warm darkness, compelling and satisfying.

Then Kaspel cleared his throat. "Come, you two—we've no time for dallying. Siwara, where's that ship that's following us?"

"Come to the window," she said, and reaching to it, opened it.

The curtains lifted straight up, snapping in the frenzied wind. A few drops of rain or spray spattered in. Dark waves tumbled clumsily below. In the sky, a brilliant ball of fire blossomed out from nowhere like a moon, illuminating the water for the briefest moment. It vanished, and there was a hollow boom as though a giant had beaten a prodigious drum.

"What was that?" Gene asked. They stared at him as though the question had been unecessary.

"Lightning, of course," said Siwara. "Have you never seen it before?"

"Is it always in globes? Like the sun?" Gene asked.

"But of course!" the princess said. "What else?"

He shrugged. "In my world its shape is different."

The girl did not answer. She pointed. "The ship's out there." Her slender forefinger stabbed the night.

They pressed on the ledge of the window, frowning through the darkness. Afar, perhaps a mile, lights twinkled, dipping and rising on the swells. A red glow flashed, dimmed and flashed again, speaking a language of light.

"They're signaling Froar," Kaspel said, as he turned from the window. Gene caught the flapping curtains and held them out of the way while Siwara slid the pane in place.

Kaspel's gaze lingered on the princess. "Siwara, you're sure about turning back?"

"Yes—when Froar left me, I began to reminisce. I had thought that perhaps you had tried to poison Gene," she favored Gene with a swift look. "Oh, I suspected you of much, Kaspel! But when I saw that ship behind us, and Froar came to me

and admitted that it was following us by his orders —then I knew! If we reach Koph, I will never see Nanich again; I know that. It's war with Koph, Kaspel, even as you said—if only we can return to Nanich!"

"We can, I think," Kaspel said. "It depends on you, Siwara. Miskal!" He drew the man to him. "Go up on deck, or wherever Froar may be, and bring him down to us. If you can bring him alone, good. If not—well, do the best you can about bringing him alone." He laid gentle hands on Siwara's shoulders. "My child, I love you now as never before." He drew his knife; held it at his side. "Gene, open the window again. Siwara, stand by that window."

She realized his intention. Paling, she went to the window.

Kaspel pointed to the door. "Go now, Miskal—bring Froar."

Gene had not opened the window; he pushed away Siwara's hands on the lock. "What are you going to do!"

"Froar will come," Kaspel said. "We will tell him our intention. If he does not put the ship back in our hands, Siwara will jump. A dead princess is of no use in Koph. Froar will have to admit that he's beaten. And if Siwara's afraid to jump, I will use this knife. Is it not right, Siwara?"

She was white and frightened, but she nodded.

"No!" Gene cried, ripping her hands from the window's lock. "No, Kaspel! You can't do this to her! Siwara, look at me! Tell me that—"

She smiled at him with detached fondness as though he were a yapping pet puppy. "Kaspel is right." She spoke to the man in blue. "If he tries to prevent me, Kaspel, stop him." Kaspel's eyes glittered with comprehension.

"Siwara," Gene said, "if you jump, then I jump, too." He snapped at Kaspel, "I hope that'll give you some satisfaction!"

"It is well," Kaspel replied mildly. To Miskal he said, "Well, why do you stand there? Go for Froar, as I told you!" The handmaiden Marza opened the door; Miskal stepped out into the hall.

Gene hugged Siwara to him. After a few seconds, she loosened his grasp and dragged upon the window. The screaming air dashed into the room. Siwara sat on the sill of the window, Gene gripping her as the ship lurched.

Miskal returned. "There's no need for these preparations," he said. "Lal and Thuir have Froar bound in your room. They stopped him as he was coming down here, doubtless to look in on you."

Kaspel sheathed his knife. "Good! Bring Froar here." Miskal bowed and went out. Kaspel gestured to the princess. "You can come down from the window, Siwara. You'd better close it—the wind's cold."

Gene lifted her to the floor, so weak with relief that he could barely push the glass in place.

Miskal and Thuir led in Froar, his hands tied behind him, a gag over his mouth. His black eyes blazed at them. Kaspel advanced to him and with exasperating slowness unfastened the gag. "Scream if you like, Froar—I've never heard you raise your voice. It will be rare treat. The ship is ours now."

Froar glowered. "You think so! My men—"

Kaspel rolled the gag into a little ball and airily tossed it into a corner. "Your men!" he scoffed. "They won't do anything while you're our captive with a knife near your heart. What rewards can they expect from a dead master? Miskal, Thuir, go out on deck and tell them that. Say that we are turning back. We'll be with you shortly."

The two men went out. Kaspel called, "Lal!" His black-coated servant plodded in. "Lal, take your knife and stand guard over Froar while we are gone. If he tries to escape, use your blade. If anyone tries to rescue him—kill! We're going out on deck."

Lal thrust the flat of his hand on Froar's back, guiding him to a cushion. "A great pleasure," he said, his teeth glinting in satisfaction, as he bared his dagger. "Nothing could be better than finishing this traitor to his princess, to Nanich—and therefore to me." He kicked Froar down on the cushion. "I hope you do nothing rash," he admonished Froar. "I want you to live until we get back to Nanich. I'm sure that your people will be very glad to see you!"

Froar scowled at him, his face dark, his jaw quivering with wrath. "You're not back in Nanich yet," he sneered. "You'll have to get past that ship out there—if you can! It's smaller, swifter—"

Kaspel went into one of the adjoining chambers, emerged with a heavy fur rug. He hung it over the window. "Cover all the openings. We don't want that ship to see any lights. Siwara, wrap yourself in something warm and follow me. I want you by my side every minute so I'll know you're save."

Marza brought out a long coat for the girl and bundled her into it.

"You, Marza," Kaspel said, "go about the ship. See that the windows are covered wherever there are lights burning, then come back and watch with Lal." The gaunt old woman wagged her head happily; before leaving the room she turned to Froar and thrust her tongue out at him!

"Now come, Siwara and Gene," Kaspel said. "There's much to be done. We've got to outrace that ship!"

VII.

Kaspel found coats for Gene and himself; muffled in them, they started out on deck with Siwara.

Stinging rain and spray lashed their faces; the wind snapped their garments around their legs. An orb of the peculiar lightning burgeoned high overhead, producing momentary daylight, then waned, followed by a hollow concussion and darkness indeed. The sails were down; the ship was riding the storm.

Kaspel shouted something, his voice too frail in the wind to be heard; Gene cupped a hand at his ear. Kaspel put an arm around Siwara and drew Gene's face close to his. "We hardly dare attempt turning in this kind of a sea. It's taking a risk, but we ought to hoist sails and speed ahead. The other ship!" He drew them to the rail; they peered behind them. The spy ship's sail was gorged with wind. Kaspel climbed to the upper deck, disappeared, then returned below.

Siwara's hair was already drenched and slapped her cheeks; she reached under her coat, unfastened the sash of her gown and bound it around her head, Gene holding her against the vessel's lurches. The men on deck were huddled against the cabin walls, out of the wind: Kaspel went to them, shouted orders. The men scattered across the deck to drag upon the yards, hauling up the stern sail. Then the foresail was dragged up. The ship strained ahead.

The princess pressed against the cabin wall where the ship's side touched it; she pushed her head out into the gale to stare at the pursuing vessel, her eyes narrowed. Gene stared with her. Rising waves effaced the following lights, slid down to disclose them, and lifted again.

Kaspel returned to them. "All our lanterns have been extinguished. They can't see us now!" His voice was a whisper in the uproar, though he waved his arms to emphasize his shouting. He had dragged up his robe for more freedom of movement, disclosing spindling legs. "Miskal's at the tiller with two others. The wind's constantly shifting. There's not so much danger of being blown clear into Koph, as far out into the unknown ocean."

Synchronically, half a dozen spheres of lightning glowed at once all over the sky. They blinked against the fleeting glare; the reverberation rang in their ears.

"Aren't you afraid that the masts will snap?" Gene called, as though Kaspel were very far away.

The other man shrugged. "We'll have to chance it for a while."

Rain was avalanching down. Siwara's sodden garments caught the wind, tugging her. She clung to Gene, shivering. Lightning blinked; thunder cracked. Kaspel scrambled across the tilting deck to some of the crew, mouthed commands at them. Gigantic gusts slapped the ship about as if playing with it.

There was a short scream, shrill, almost human. The foresail writhed, ripped. The wind altered, pulling the ship around abreast of an onrushing wave, which smashed against the side of the vessel, almost tipping it over; the deck was nearly vertical for an instant. Siwara was thrown against the rail, Gene gripping her; Kaspel and some of the men slid clear across the planking. The ship heeled. Gene straightened up. The girl had been stunned. Kaspel and the others were busy loosening the yards.

Lifting Siwara, Gene lurched to the cabinway, clawed the door open and carried the princess through the dark to the little room that had been his; he laid her on the bed. Even in the murk she was very white. He drew off her soaked coat and lifted the covers over her. A hand grasping the head of the bed to steady himself, he bent over her, his other hand lifting one of hers.

She did not stir. He kneeled beside the bed, massaging her wrist. "Siwara! Siwara!"

Then she opened her eyes. "Gene! This terrible storm! I'm frightened!" She was no princess now, no puppet of her country—only a terrified girl.

He touched his cheek to hers, then stood up. She lifted her head. "Where are you going?"

"To get your servant, and something dry for you. I won't be long."

"Light the lamp."

"I can't—I don't know how it's done." He stumbled across the dim room, groping about until he had found one of the chests. He jerked up the weighty lid, reached until he found cloth, and whipped out the fabric, let the lid fall down.

Siwara sat up weakly. "Are you still here? What was that sound?"

"I was just finding myself something to change into. Lie back, Siwara. I'll be back in a moment."

"Don't go, Gene. I'm afraid to be alone. I'm afraid something will happen while you're away." She pressed her hands to her temples. "This terrible voyage!"

He simulated a not very plausible laugh. "Nonsense. You'll be all right until I come back."

"Hurry, then—hurry." White lightning flared beyond the window, revealing her eyes, the curve of her cheek; thunder obscured his reassuring answer.

He staggered to her quarters, retaining his footing by pressing his palms against the walls of the narrow corridor. The wind ululated like the cries of a horde of demons on their way to an evil Sabbath. The ship veered as he opened the door to Siwara's rooms, almost flinging him within. In the uncertain glint of the swinging lantern, he saw that Froar was lying lax on his cushions, his face gray with seasickness. Lal, watching beside him, looked up with a cheerful grin. In a corner, Marza, the maid, was huddled, clutching a carved image, perhaps a small idol, to her breast, bab-

bling nonsense born of scare. Gene went to her, bent over her and shook her. She did not glance up at him or acknowledge his presence in any manner, only went on with her gabble. Gene shook her again more vigorously. The veils of her terror lifted slowly; her eyes peeped at him as though from vast distance.

"Siwara's in my room. Take some dry clothing in to her."

She raised her haggard face as though his words were barely audible. Then comprehension came to her. She nodded, thrusting the little statuette into the bosom of her costume, and scrabbled to her feet. She hobbled into the adjacent rooms and returned, garments across her arms. Bending her head to him in a little bow, she tottered down the hall to Siwara.

Gene stripped off his wet clothes and arrayed himself in the coat which he had brought. It was too small, leaving his chest bare. He looked with distaste at the short sleeves and rolled them above his elbows, tucked part of the hem of the robe into the belt at his side, freeing his legs for quick motion. He strode to the window. The wind wormed around the edges of the glass, disturbing the curtains. Lightning flamed; thunder boomed.

Lal stood with him, peering out into the erratic rags of rain and black night. There was no sign of the other ship's lights. Spume lay like lace on the waves; flying spray filmed the window. Lal shook his head in silent comment of the storm; Gene clapped a friendly hand on his back and returned to Siwara. The lamp was lit, swinging wildly from its bracket, and the shadow of the bed's canopy expanded grotesquely on the wall, contracted and swelled again.

Siwara was still on the bed, but she had changed into the clothing which Marza had brought her. The maid was beside her, hugging the small eidolon to her breast, one of Siwara's arms protectively around her. The girl smiled wanly at Gene.

"Marza's nearly witless with terror. This is her first time out on the sea. Is Froar all right?"

Gene drew up a chair and seated himself, nodding in answer to her question. Siwara stroked her maid's lank hair, then put her hand out to him. He gripped it, saying nothing. Then she shook her head unbelievingly.

"And a little while ago I laughed at you! I thought you were weak! But now I know that you are strong. And—I love you, Gene. So will my people."

Kaspel reeled in, panting, his face taut with exhaution, his dripping coat plastered to his slender frame. Gene gave him the chair; Kaspel's eyes thanked him as he dropped on the seat, breathing heavily.

"We seem to have lost the spy ship—but I don't know where we're going," he said. "We're being driven into the unknown sea. There's no knowing if we'll ever see Nanich again."

Gene, dragging out a change of apparel for the old man, looked up; Siwara's face was anxious.

"Kaspel!" she cried. "Is there no way of guiding our course!"

He shook his head glumly. "The sails are down. The foremast is cracked. We'll come limping into Nanich, if we ever see it at all."

Gene let drop the lid of the chest and pressed the dry clothing upon Kaspel, who smiled gratefully. "Why do you think we'll never reach Nanich?"

"Don't you understand?" Siwara asked impatiently. "There is so much water. Only Koph and its colonies, and Nanich. The rest"—she waved her hand—"nothing but water. Endless reaches of it. We might sail for years and never come to land." She frowned, musing. "Though there are tales of islands, somewhere—but nobody alive has ever seen them."

The night moved along so slowly that the ship seemed to be keeping pace with its pilgrimage across the world. When day came, the scudding clouds were so dark that at best it was but twilight. Kaspel freed the two men who had been tied in his room; he talked to them, apparently convincing them that it was no use now to serve Froar. There was nothing to be done on deck but watch the tiller.

Froar had been moved to his own quarters, his bonds replaced by iron manacles. Siwara spent most of the time gazing out of the windows with Kaspel and Gene. The storm did not abate, and there was a slow leak below deck that had to be calked. Kaspel laid a game board on Siwara's low table, and attempted to teach Gene the rules of the contest, but their interest was forced. Marza remained out of sight, doubtless mumbling to her little idol.

At last Siwara pushed back the game pieces and sighed. "We might almost be cursed," she said. "From the very start, things have been bad—and look at us now. Kaspel, I can't fix my mind to the game. You two play on, if you like. I can't." She went to the window, gripping its sill as the vessel careened.

The carved pawns toppled over and rolled off the board as quickly as Gene and the old man could set them up. Gene made senseless mistakes as he played, and Kaspel shook his head, smiling indulgently. They tired of the game, and stood by Siwara at the window.

The storm continued through the following night, but when Gene awoke, the sea was calming. Lal, assigned to him by Kaspel, brought him water for washing. Refreshed, he went on deck. Sev-

eral men were binding the split mast with bands of metal; others were engaged in sewing the rent sail. Mountains of clouds were rolling away, their edges brilliant with sunlight. The wind subsided to the merest breath. The aft sail had been hoisted.

Siwara joined Gene and Kaspel. Her hair was tightly bound with threaded gems; her brocaded gown was cloaked by a splendid mantle. Her bearing was confidently serene; she was a princess again. But she asked Kaspel, "Where are we now?"

He spread his hands ineffectually. "I have no idea. But we're heading west, back toward Nanich, or where it ought to be."

She rested her slim hands on the rail, gazing at the retreating clouds. "What strange shapes the shadows take on the sea! Look, over there—it almost might be land."

They followed her eyes. "It looks like a plateau of some sort," Gene said. "The atmosphere trembles so that you can't be sure what you're seeing."

"The shadow moves, but that dark spot lies still," Kaspel said. "Land I think it is!" He called to one of the men. "Look over there!" He pointed. The men at work on the torn sail looked up; those concerned with repairing the mast turned their faces.

"It is land!" one of them cried. They flocked to the rail, muttering to each other excitedly.

"Of course it can't be Koph or Nanich," Siwara said. "It's not large enough to be either. What is it then? Kaspel, do you think that it's one of those fabulous islands? Could it really be?"

"We could pass by it," Kaspel said slowly. not far out of our path."

Siwara laid a hand on Gene's arm. "Kaspel—do you recall the legends of the islands? The cities of jewels, the strange arts of their peoples?" Her voice rose excitedly. "Remember the tale of the well in which is the very flame of life itself?"

"And the devil beasts, and the race of torturers," Kaspel added grimly. "Siwara, what's on your mind?"

She deliberated. "We ought to visit that island. Who knows what may be upon it! Treasures—we could buy supplies for Nanich's defense through some of Koph's colonies. They'd sell to us, if we could pay. Maybe there's a people who could help us in the coming war— Kaspel, we must visit that island!"

He put a hand to his chin, uncertain. "I don't know, Siwara. The faster we reach home, the better."

"But it needn't take long," she wheedled. "The sail will be mended soon. And we can use the oars."

"And if the people on the island are cannibals?" Kaspel asked. "Suppose it's a wilderness of wild beasts?"

"We will pass near it," she said with finality. "Very near. We can see if there are any cities. If there are, we will land."

Kaspel speculated on the far shore's possibilities. "If that is what you desire—very well. We'll change tack." He whirled to the clustering seamen, captaining them. "Back to your places. We're altering our course toward the land!"

As they neared the shore, they saw that it was an island of naked rock. Innumerable spires of stone rose sheer into the clouds like rough-hewn pillars, their tapering points thrusting into the mists like spindles impaling scraps of white paper. At their bases were slopes of fallen debris. The waves slid smoothly to rest over a sandy beach.

It was an awesome sight, that island. Its pinnacles must have been hundreds of feet in height. "It reminds me of the skyline of New York," Gene said, "only higher—twenty or thirty times higher. Like a windowless city of stone."

"A city of giants," Kaspel commented. "It makes this ship nothing but a splinter in a pond. I don't like it. There's something cold about it, and aloof. Are you satisfied now, Siwara? Shall we go on to Nanich?"

"No," she said, gently. "Let us go closer still. And it doesn't look unpleasant to me. If only there were some greenery! I am thinking, Kaspel, that it may be—we have a colony for Nanich."

He stared at her. "Perhaps. Yes, there may be minerals upon it that we can use in Nanich—who knows! We'll go closer." He called out orders.

The island towered above them like the columns of a cyclopean temple. Siwara pointed. "A city!"

They stared. Yes, there was a city, and no small one. It was of the same gray stone as the crags. Its architecture was Egyptian, Gene thought, severe pylons and sheer walls rising in a series of terraces. Three of the huge pillars were welded together, forming a niche, and the city, sheltered in that gigantic nook, was like an ant hill in the shadow of a cathedral.

There was nothing alive about the city, no vestige of verdure. Two stone piers ran out to sea but they sheltered no ships. It was like a place constructed for the dead, waiting to receive phantom ships and the souls aboard them.

"We'll send out a boat with several men," Kaspel said. "They can look around then tell us if there's any danger. If not, we'll go ashore. But we mustn't waste too much time."

The princess concurred. A boat was lowered over the side and Kaspel chose the delegation that was to proceed to shore. Siwara and Gene watched them rowing off, dwindling with distance

until the little craft was hardly a dark speck on the water.

At sundown, while Kaspel and Gene were dining with Siwara, Miskal came to them. "They're coming back!" he said.

Siwara laid down the morsel of bread which she was nibbling and deserted the table, tugging Gene up as she passed him. Kaspel hastily arose. They went out on the deck. The island's spires were warmly red in the dying sunlight. The boat was not far from the ship. Its occupants appeared hale enough.

The princess jerked Gene's sleeve. "Call to them, Gene. Call for me and ask them what they've found."

Gene made a funnel of his hands at his mouth and shouted, "Did you find anything? Were there people?"

They strained forward, waiting for an answer. One of the men stopped rowing and stood up, raising a hand. "We found—this!" he called. He was too far away; the object was too small to see.

"What is it?" Gene cried.

"We're not sure!"

The boat was much closer. The thing in the standing man's hand was visible, sharp edged in the rosy sun glow.

It appeared to be a little clay doll.

VIII.

"Only a little doll of clay!" Siwara murmured, the image in one of her hands. "And yet—it is clothed with mystery. Who made it, and why? For a child's toy? Has it a religious significance? I doubt that it could be the portrait of anyone living. Nothing like it can possibly exist!"

Kaspel and Gene were with her in her cabin, seated beside her on long cushions under the large window. They had dined with her and then she had called in the men who had gone ashore. When they had first returned on board, their replies to her queries had been incoherent with excitement. She had allowed them time to eat and to marshal their memories into sequential order.

Night was dropping its burden of darkness over the sea and the nameless island, wrapping them in storage against the return of day. Stars peeped through the window, shaking as though in mirth.

Siwara examined the effigy wonderingly for perhaps the twentieth time. When it had first reached the ship, its clay had been wet, as though it had been freshly made, but now as it dried it was stiffening. Beautifully modeled, it was human in shape, and yet something more than human. Its hands and feet were webbed, the fingers and toes lengthened into pointed claws, and minute lines cross-hatched the legs and torso, suggesting tiny scales. Its eyes were immense, round and staring, and instead of hair its head bore a finny crest over which Siwara puzzled.

"It looks human," she said, "and yet—it looks like a fish. If it is an idol of some sort, I do not know of the god that it represents. Kaspel, do you?" The old man slowly shook his head, pursing his lips as he referred to his knowledge of things pantheistic.

"What do you think of it?" Her voice softened fondly as she turned to Gene, who shrugged, baffled.

She motioned to the men. "Surely now you can tell your story straight. One of you speak—"

The men glanced to each other, all of them eager to narrate their adventures. One raised a finger to the others, pointing to himself. They nodded agreement. His eyes lighting with pleasure, the man spoke shyly, deferentially.

"Princess, when we left the ship we were afraid, very afraid. The city was so still—and yet we thought that it was like a living thing, watching us as we came, and resenting our intrusion. I know it's foolish." He reddened, faltering. "I am only your poor servant, and not a poet. I have no poet's words, but I have a poet's heart. And that was the way it seemed to me."

"Not at all foolish," Siwara encouraged warmly, and whispered to Gene, "You see the kind of men we have in Nanich? What man of Koph would be so sensitive as to perceive the mood of that city? I, too, felt something living about it—" She reverted to the other man. "Yes, speak on."

"The others sensed it, too—that the city did not like us. It was so quiet, so watchful—like the cat that crouches motionless before the heedless, playful mouse—and then suddenly sweeps its paw, thus"—he shot out a hand, whipped it back—"and the mouse lies still."

He went on, "The harbor was swept clean by the wind from the water, but not the city, no! Inside its dim halls the dust was thick, thick as though the broom of time had never brushed there. Our feet left long tracks as we plodded through it, through all its endless halls.

"We walked on and on. There was nothing but the gray dust. Here and there lay softly rounded mounds. One of them we disturbed, whisking the dust away and uncovering the bones of an animal that must have died ages ago, for, at our touch, the white skeleton crumbled to powder. The city has not been lived in for who knows how many years—and yet we knew that *it* lived, that its spirit was watching over us. And the bones seemed like an evil omen.

"Light came unwillingly in through narrow slits of windows high in the lofty walls. Who-

ever made that city meant it to stand forever. The stones are as smooth today as when first set up. They're not carved or painted after our fashion in Nanich; they are bare, but they do not look unfinished. No." He frowned, reminiscing. "They make our buildings of Nanich look small and and petty in comparison."

Siwara stirred restlessly. "Yes, but this doll? Where did you find it?"

The seaman waved her into silence, his eyes rapt. She was no princess then, only a member of his audience. "I'll come to that. There were no tracks in the dust, only ours. We trudged on, leaving clouds of dust whirling in the air behind us like gray smoke. The corridors were endless. We were in a maze, but that did not fret us; we knew that we could get out by retracing our steps, watching our tracks. And after a long, weary walk, we came to a room oh, you never dreamed its like!"

He spread his hands as he described it. "It was so wide and so deep that we were barely able to see from one end to another. And the ceiling was so far above us that it was like the gray sky of dusk. What men could have made it, we asked each other. Your palace in Nanich is no small thing, princess, but it would go into that room four times, and still not cover the floor; if you stretched your palace's walls three times their height, still they would not have touched the ceiling.

"The doors to that place were narrow, but tall —ten times the height of a man. They had rotted away from their hinges, disintegrating into the ever-present dust. Then Gogir here pointed," he nodded at the man whom he named, "and I saw a platform at the far side of the room. It ran across the room from wall to wall. It was not high, only a few feet from the floor. Three or four steps ran up to it."

"Seven," one of the men corrected him. counted them—seven."

The narrator shrugged. "Perhaps there were seven. They were very low; they hardly mattered. Then we noticed, for the first time, carving on the walls. At least I think it was carving. There had been no sign of age anywhere in the city, so it could not have resulted by the falling away of weathered stone. No, it must have been carving.

"But why was it there, and what did it represent? It was vast, vast—it covered almost all of that stupendous reach of wall. And it was only an outline, thus." His hand sketched a scalloped contour like the irregular edges of a puddle. "I wish I were an artist, that I might draw it for you. For, although it was only an outline, apparently meaningless, there was something in it that filled us with dread!"

His eyes were rapt again. "It was as though the city's watchful spirit had been condensed into a line. That carving was somehow—alive! Alive and watchful. We were all vaguely worried by it," he ducked his head bashfully. "I didn't want to remain there. I . . I am not superstitious, but I didn't like that thing. But the others were braver than I, so I did not hang back when they went forward to examine the sculpture.

"On the dais was a slab of stone. We didn't see it until we were nearly upon it—not that it was small. No! But the immensity of the room,

the horror that lay in the carving, they dwarfed it into insignificance!

"It was low, reaching only to our knees, but it was long—thirty feet long. Ten feet broad. And upon it, like the glass sheets that sometimes cover our tabletops in Nanich, was a layer of glass six inches thick, with the dust heavy upon it.

"Somehow we knew that we were in a temple, that the carving was its god, the slab an altar. We had profaned it, entering without the prescribed rites. And yet there was worship in our hearts as we looked about its severe magnificence, worship that we hoped the god would perceive and respect.

"We did not tarry there any longer; we were too nervous. We went back through the door and started out. As we plowed through the maze, our eyes on the trail we had left on entering, Thylmin seemed to notice something. He pulled our arms, halting us, and bent down on his hands and knees.

" 'What do you see?' Gogir asked, bending down, too. All four of us were crouching in the dust as Thylmin pointed. 'These are our tracks,' he said, 'but look—can't you see tracks within ours?'

"We looked—and he was right. Something had been walking in the path that our feet had made—some little animal. The tracks were blurred; the loose dust had slid down, filling the hollows. But Thylmin found a stretch of the prints that were clear. They were human—the footprints of a human being only six inches tall!

"The footprints"—he pointed dramatically—"of that little clay image in your hand, princess!"

Siwara glanced at the doll, fascinated. The seaman continued his story.

"We didn't know then that they were tracks left by—a doll! We thought that they had been made by a person, and our fear of the shape on the temple wall was displaced by curiosity. From where did the little being come? We went on slowly, our eyes on the floor. We walked far.

"And at last we came to the place where the tiny tracks had joined ours! They led into another section of the maze. We followed, zigzagging through the innumerable turns of the halls. The little thing was just ahead of us, we knew, for the time came when we rounded a bend and crossed our own tracks. We did not care. We were interested in seeing the little being. We crossed our tracks again and again—and suddenly fear gripped my heart!"

He clapped a hand to his chest. "Yes, fear gripped me—for we were lost! How could we find our way out now, with our tracks crossing and recrossing? We were lost in the maze. And then I knew, and told the others. It was the doing of the god whose temple we had profaned! The little man was one of his worshipers and had been sent to confuse us in the maze so that we could never step outside it, but must wander on and on, hopefully, hungering and thirsting—until, like the skeleton that we had found, we were only bones shrouded in dust!

"That thought angered us, all of us. We determined then that we would find the little creature. Surely it knew its way. We would make it tell! We did not entertain the possibility that though human in shape, the tiny thing might have no more wits than a mouse, and that it had become lost in the maze even as we as it prowled about. For what could have set it to prowling? Was it seeking food? Food, in all that dust? We had seen not even a blade of grass on all the ground around the city—only bald rock that itself had seemed hungry, and wistful for the touch of life."

He leaned forward eagerly. "There you have it! I've expressed the spirit of the city at last! It was as if it had died long ago, but its ghost had lingered on, craving return to life. Waiting for life to return to it, that it might seize it and use it for its own ends!' That was why we were afraid!

"And we caught up to the thing at last. Its legs were so short—it could not cover ground as swiftly as we! It was a gray little shape, as though filmed with the dust. It was that little figure in your hand, princess. But it moved—it walked! It was alive! I swear that it was alive!

"It turned around, looked back over its shoulder, started to run! Gogir ran forward and snatched it up, and the instant that it was in his hand it was inert. No life in it. Only a little doll of clay.

"We crowded around Gogir, looking at it, fear returning to our hearts—fear of the awesome carving in the temple. And we lost our heads. We ran—where we went, we did not care, only we must keep moving onward lest that god leave his home in the carving and overtake us, and snatch our lives that he craved!"

He was still for an instant, his eyes somber as he brooded over the memory. The other men were introspective, too, sitting huddled as though the cold hand of terror had crept around them in another embrace. Then the seaman resumed:

"Gogir stumbled, fell. The little clay doll dropped from his hand. We stopped long enough to help Gogir to his feet—and then stopped indeed! For the little clay image was moving!

"It drew itself up slowly, as though stunned by the fall. It stood staring at us a moment with its blank eyeballs, then turned and scampered. Gogir cried out to it but it did not halt. Gogir used some bad language"—the man's eyes twinkled humorously—"and he pursued the little figure, scooped it up with a sweep of his hand. And then —it was only a doll again! A little clay doll, nothing else. But its pose was different. When

Gogir had first touched it, the doll's legs were straight, its arms at its sides. But now its action was frozen in the pose: its legs were bent, running, its arms drawn up and its fists clenched!

"Gogir did not hurt it, for all that it was only a little doll. He did not squeeze it. And there was no need—it did not move to escape. But we had seen it running, and to us it was still alive, as dolls seem alive to children, to the little girls who cradle their puppet babies and sing to them.

"Gogir said, 'It's magic. The god of the carving has used his magic on us. We think that this little thing lives—but it is only a trick of our minds which the god has clouded with an enchantment.' For, after all, who could look on the terrible lines of that carving and still go on thinking as before?

"Gogir lifted the image to hurl it on the floor. Thylmin stayed him. 'We must show it to our princess,' he said. Gogir nodded. We started back, searching for the exit.

"Our feet had kicked up much dust. It tortured our lungs. It was bitter. The day wore away—we were afraid of the coming of night. Perhaps the god in the stone did not awake to life until night, and that was why he had sent the clay image—to detain us until he could come for us.

"We went mad again. Gogir thrust the image in his girdle and we ran—ran and ran and ran. Then we found the door and came out. The sun was low. This ship, lying on the water as on a mirror, was never so pleasing to our eyes despite the unpleasantness that has been aboard it—the disappearance of our captain, Froar's meddling with our loyalties to you, princess—despite all these things, we were glad to see this ship.

"We pushed our boat into the water and came back—and that is all."

Siwara glanced at the other explorers. "He has forgotten nothing? You can add something?"

The men shook their heads. One said, "It is all as he has told you, princess. Only his telling is much better than ours would be." The others nodded in approval.

Siwara stood. "Then you may go. Marza!" Her maid appeared in the doorway. "Give these men a handful of money!" She considered. "No, money is not enough. You were brave. Here." She jerked her necklace from her throat, catching the glinting amethysts before they could slip from the snapped thread. "Here. Divide these among yourselves. Jewels, as jewels, have little value in Nanich, where all share their beauty, but they have been precious to me—my mother gave them to me—and I have worn them on my heart." She pressed them into the palm of the man who had recounted his adventures. "Go, with my thanks." The maid Marza appeared and clinked coins into the men's palms.

They filed out humbly, their eyes adoring the princess. Siwara touched the nakedness of her neck. "Kaspel, it's in my mind to visit that city tomorrow."

Kaspel looked up. "Are you mad? Without considering the import of this man's story?"

She pressed to the window, her eyes combatting the starry darkness as they searched for the black bulk of the island. She turned from the pane, looked down to the old man. "Obviously it's what they said—magic!"

Kaspel lifted a bony hand in horror. "Siwara! After all my teaching! You are as superstitious as they!"

She shrugged and seated herself again, laying a hand on one of Gene's. "What else could it be but magic?"

Kaspel put down his hand, stroked his thigh ruminatively. "The men were frightened. They admitted that they were a little mad. They ran. They found this little doll. They imagined that they had seen it running, too."

Gene took the image from Siwara. "But the tracks they saw, Kaspel! And the doll is still wet. How did it come to be there in that dust?"

Kaspel pondered. "I'd forgotten about those tracks."

The princess slapped the pillow energetically. "It was magic, Kaspel. There is a god in the city. A strong god who has not been served for long. I will go to him tomorrow and pray to him to help us beat off the warriors of Koph."

"Magic!" Kaspel scoffed. "It's nothing but wishful thinking!"

"Nevertheless, Kaspel, I will go to that city tomorrow. Don't you think I'm right?" the princess appealed to Gene.

He eyed the doll. "Siwara—I don't know. We have no magic back in New York. I'll visit the temple in your place. You must stay here on the ship where you'll be safe."

She laughed shortly in mockery. "Safe? With Froar on board? We never know at just what minute he's apt to do the same thing that you did—convince his watchers to free him and follow him. If you go to the city I go with you. I go regardless of whether you do or not. I must see that god—"

"I will accompany you," Kaspel said. "Of course, it's nothing but the merest idiocy, this mission—but I'll go with you."

"What about Froar?" Gene asked. "You can't leave him here. We're still not sure that all our men are really faithful."

"Froar can come, too," Siwara said briskly. "There's no danger; he's got his hands in chains. We won't be wasting time if that's what you're about to mention, Kaspel. The men are still binding the split mast." She patted one of Gene's hands and arose. "Then it's definitely settled.

We'll leave for the city tomorrow as soon as the sun is up."

She touched her hair. "Oh, I'm sleepy! We'd all of us better get to bed as soon as possible if we want to be rested for the morrow. And you'd better take another look at Froar. I didn't like his attitude when I last saw him. For a man in chains he's remarkably cheerful." Her mouth altered from a kissable thing to a thin line. "He was very satirical in his remarks, playing the gallant, but I suspected that there was something behind it. I wonder what?" Gene had arisen and she kissed him. "Good night, my dear. I rather like you in that robe—it's too small, but it's becoming. I must remember to have Marza work on that costume for me that the women wear in your world—what is it called? Ah, yes—slacks."

"God forbid!" said Gene.

IX.

In the yellow dawn light the city was like brass. The sky was free of clouds, and the needling crags lifted up and up until they merged with the atmosphere, like pillars supporting the heavens. The little boat slid over the waters, rowed by four men. At its prow Siwara sat close to Gene. Kasel and Froar rode in back, Kaspel resplendent in shimmering blue as though he had donned his court dress to impress the forgotten god, Froar in dull maroon wool, the chains on his hands hidden in the folds of his long sleeves. He sat, head erect, shoulders squared, as though he were the real leader of the expedition.

"There are no sea birds—haven't you noticed?" Siwara asked. Gene stroked the sword which he had strapped to his side, stroked it lovingly and with a trace of pleased fear. He was no weakling who had slaved in a dreary New York office; he was a man of Nanich, serving his princess.

The boat grounded on the sandy beach, the rowers pulled in their oars and dragged in the craft. They, too, were armed, and they stole glances at the ominous city, their faces tense with apprehension.

Gene assisted Siwara out of the boat. Kaspel helped Froar ashore. The princess turned to the oarsmen. "You may stay here and wait. I don't think that we'll be long. If we aren't back by noon, come for us. You're not afraid?"

They hurriedly reassured her. She touched Gene's arm. "Come along." They plodded over the sand, the four of them—Siwara, Gene, Kaspel and Froar—to the broad avenue of flagstones that ran from the gate of the city to the stone pier. At the gateway they paused, staring up. There was no gate now; time had nibbled it away, but it must have been prodigious, a hundred feet wide, two hundred high. Whoever had made it had accomplished an architectural marvel.

"Amazing!" Froar's voice grated. They glanced at him, startled—they had been so accustomed to thinking of him with rancor that his fraternizing with them was unexpected. But he smiled at them as though entering into the occasion on an equal footing. They said nothing, started on.

Beyond the gate was a square, perhaps a market place, devoid of stalls and wares. Bare—and as the seaman had said, hungry. Streets forked away from it like the branches of a tree, and rows of squat little houses. They entered one. There was nothing in it but dust. Its small square windows, high in the walls, were without panes.

Ahead the temple loomed, pressing against the precipices. They walked to it, climbing the wide steps. Its entrance, too, was vast; they were like ants going through an ordinary door. They were unimportant, dwindled to paltriness.

Inside the doorway, the dust began.

There was no use following the tracks that the others had made. They walked on, speaking in whispers. Gene stooped frequently to make a cross with his fingertip in the dust. "To show us which trail is our own," he explained.

The halls went on and on. The men had gone straight ahead; then their path had crossed upon itself. Gene led his party to the side, keeping always to the right. Through gray hall into vast chamber, through another hall and another chamber they went—and always there was nothing but dust. As the seaman had said, there were mounds in the dust. Gene paused and gingerly prodded one. He frowned; his hand had encountered something. He picked it up. It was a piece of carved metal, hollow and pyramidal, as though meant to fit over the corner of a wooden chest. It was not very large.

They examined the carvings. "Look!" Siwara said. "Figures like the clay doll—human and still not quite human." She gave the piece of metal to Kaspel to carry and they went on. They stepped from a chamber into a corridor, and stopped. Framed by the doorway beyond, a garden lay brilliant in the sunlight.

They hurried forward to the doorway's threshold. The garden was the temple's courtyard. And what a garden! And within it they saw their first living thing.

The trees stretched on for half a mile, tender, pale golden-green leaves as of early spring spraying out like tents from the poles of purple-black trunks. Some resembled birches, but their papery bark was pale pink, and tangled clusters of soft blue flowers drooped heavily from their scant boughs. There were matted tiers of yellow azaleas.

Soft grass grew in high clumps, as golden as if blood of sunlight fed the blades. Farther on, banked by soft, deep yellow moss, a dark-green

brooklet gurgled, pearly stones gleaming in its depths and little silver fish streaking meteorlike within it.

Something like an antelope, but impossibly slim, minced over the moss, bending its long neck to drink from the stream. It was oblivious to them.

They stepped into the garden. Butterflies with disproportionately large wings fluttered up from the grass, and out of the trees, strange little blue birds flashed, preying on the insects, twittering in flight. Kaspel stumbled, bent down.

He aimed a forefinger into the grass. "I wonder what these are?" They seemed to be apples which had grown on slim stems, become heavy and sagged to the ground. Gene discovered a large yellow fruit on a bush nearby; it resembled a pear.

"This place—why, it's a paradise!" Siwara cried happily.

They rambled along, Gene ahead of them. Suddenly he stopped, lifting a finger to his lips. They listened.

They heard—a voice! Someone was singing! The voice was soft and high, not like a woman's, rather like a child's.

"I can't understand the words," Siwara whispered. She turned to Kaspel inquiringly, but he shook his head.

"That's peculiar," Gene muttered. "They're very clear." He repeated them. "Dance little people, dance for me—who made you from the streamlet's mud. Live and move in ecstasy, my thought your thought, my will your blood—" He frowned at them. "Can't you make those words out?" But Siwara and Kaspel shook their heads; Froar stared.

"It's clear enough—I can distinguish syllables," Kaspel breathed, "but they don't mean anything."

Gene puzzled, "It's odd that I can understand them and you can't. Let's see who's singing them." He crept forward, cautiously lifting the blossom-laden branches out of the way, only his feet making sound as they rustled through the grass.

He stopped. The others emerged from the little thicket and stopped beside him.

The stream had bent. Before them was a stretch of moss and gurgling water. On the moss danced three of the tiny clay figures so human in shape and yet so nonhuman.

Over them bent a man—or was it a man? He, too, was like the figures in his resemblance to humanity. His feet were webbed, the toes projecting into sharp claws. His hands were webbed talons. Scales glinted greenly on his legs and abdomen. He had a decided paunch. His face was like a seal's, the eyes enormous, the nose only a set of nostrils over the crescent slit of his mouth. A spiky crest jutted from his forehead, ran down his nape and dwindled along his spine. He was not fearsome, merely ludicrous as he crouched above the little clay dolls which danced, reaching out a long paw to caress them, herd them together, his goggling eyes rolling blissfully as he whispered to them—Gene heard the words clearly. "You are happy, my children, so happy! And you love me, me the father who made you. Kneel to me!" The dolls dropped to their knees simultaneously, raising adoring arms in unison. "Now dance again—"

Then he turned from them and the dolls dropped lifeless. "What's the use?" he asked. "What am I doing but talking to myself?"

His eyes touched Gene and the others. With a little cry of surprise he sat back flat on the little dolls, his mouth opening to an enormous circle. He jumped to his feet. "People! People!" Then he looked accusingly up to the sky. "Orcher, is this another one of your jokes?"

If he expected an answer none was forthcoming. After an instant he hurried to the explorers. "People!" he cried. "People! Impossible—but here you are, really people! I simply can't believe it!" He laid hands on them, pinching them, prodding them, tugging their clothing. At his approach, Siwara had hastily clutched Gene. The fishman blinked his eyes reproachfully at her. "You're afraid of me? Me?" He tilted back his head, laughing. "Ho-ho, that's amusing. Afraid of me!"

Siwara said to Gene, "I can't understand what he's saying. Do you think he's dangerous?" Kaspel had unsheathed his knife.

"Can't you really understand him? I can. He's overjoyed to see us," Gene said.

Siwara eyed the monstrosity dubiously. "I hope he doesn't want to eat us," she said. "What! Can he read my thoughts?"

For abruptly the creature had stopped laughing; he scanned her mournfully. "Of course I mean no harm," he said. But Siwara still did not understand.

"There's something odd about this," Gene told him. "I can grasp your words' meaning, my friends can't. My name's Gene"—he no longer used his last name since it appeared that Siwara, Kaspel and Froar had none. "This is Princess Siwara of Nanich, and this is Kaspel, her minister. And this"—his voice was resentful—"is Froar."

The girl looked up at Gene, amazed. "But you can talk to him! You're introducing us!"

The weird entity placed a hand on his breast. "And I am Yanuk." He moved among them, handling them again. Kaspel was a bit nervous; Froar stood rigid, haughty. Siwara shrank against Gene. "But it's wonderful to have someone with whom to talk again! You're the first humans I've seen in—" He held up his fingers as though counting them. "Centuries, I'm sure it must be. People! And what beautiful clothes! Speaking of clothes"

—he glanced at his paunch worriedly—"I'm sorry. I wasn't expecting visitors. Just a minute." He turned hastily, bent over the moss. What did he do to it? To his guests he seemed to be running his hands across it, first one way, then another. He straightened up, and in his hands was a scarf woven of the yellow moss. He wound it around himself.

"There, that's better. Why is the girl so distrustful?" he asked Gene. "Is she your mate?"

"I think so," Gene answered. "It hasn't been fully decided yet. She's a princess—I'm a nobody. I don't belong in this world at all."

"A mate," Yanuk said, lifting his eyes to the heavens. "That's what I'd like. I've prayed to Orcher, but he says he won't create one for me, that he wants me to be disciplined. I'm terribly lonely."

"Who's Orcher?" Gene asked.

"He built the city. I can see that you're wondering about me. But this is no way for you to be, standing like this! Come along with me." He started off, summoning them with a flip of a claw.

Gene followed, translating the creature's speeches to the others. Siwara said, "It's queer that you can make sense of what he's saying and we can't. You can't blame that on thought transference and the strange quality of our atmosphere, Gene. There must be another reason."

Yanuk led them from the garden through one of the huge doors and up a stair. The floor had been cleared of dust. The stair was very long. At its top they turned and went up a second flight. Then a third, a fourth, until they were very weary. But Yanuk was unfatigued. He bounced up the steps, his paunch joggling in a Santa Claus manner.

At last they reached his chambers, which were crammed with fantastic furniture. It was like the interior of a surrealistic junk shop. There were five or six rugs on the floor, thrown on without much care; Froar stumbled, his manacles clinking; he jerked up his chin, offended. There were metal chests, high tripods, long tables littered with parched clay images, several structures like models of Gothic cathedrals, shimmering as though composed of mother-of-pearl. Light pried in through a high window.

"My studio," Yanuk waved a hand lightly. He stopped, sniffing. "What's that?" Gene detected the odor of rotting flowers. "Oh, I know." Yanuk hurried to a long, rusty-colored roll. "I had my dolls make me a rug of flowers, and it's withering. Excuse me while I take it away." He lifted it, dragged it to one of the Gothic models and stuffed it into the little edifice. "You might call this thing an incinerator," he said, tapping the structure. "Sit down! Sit down, won't you?" Gene interpreted to the princess and her ministers.

They found chairs, Froar managing to pull up one for himself without his fetters inconveniencing him. They seated themselves. "Now about myself," Yanuk said. "Of course I expect to hear all about you afterward." He lifted a warning forefinger.

He wriggled into a pose of ease. "We sea folk used to dwell in the ocean—oh, ages and ages ago. I've lost track of the time. There were a lot of us. But the water turned cold. So we came on land. This island became our haunt. We lived in the garden, what few of us hadn't perished from cold, and Orcher happened along. I don't know where he came from, and I don't think Orcher knows either. He's been alive so long that, wise as he is, he couldn't possibly remember.

"Orcher built this city. It was just a whim. My people were superstitious. They thought he was a god and worshiped him. Oh, the rites were awfully nasty—blood, you know, and sacrificing the first-born and that sort of thing." His eyes popped disdainfully. "I thought it was in horrid taste and shied clear of it. And Orcher liked that." He drew himself up proudly.

"Orcher says he respected me because I was skeptical. Just because he was more clever than we—that didn't make him a god. At least not to me. And he liked that. He tutored me for a while until this place tired him. And he made me immortal so that I'd have time to develop myself—a fiend for self-improvement, Orcher is. And here I've been for years and years and years. I amuse myself making little toys and dabbling in what the uninformed might call magic—it's a science of a sort—but now and then I get terribly bored with it.

"Occasionally a ship has been blown in these waters and I have company. But the people grow old and die, and then I'm alone again. Sometimes I think that it'd be a good thing to build a ship and go looking around the world, but I hate to leave this place—I'm afraid that Orcher wouldn't like it. After all, someone's got to look after The Machine—"

"The Machine?" Gene asked.

"The Machine by which he can be summoned. It's down in the temple. He leaves it there so he can be called from wherever he is in case some of his—well, relatives drop in. But they never have. You see, although he won't admit it, he's as lonely as I am—and that's why it wounds me when he refuses me a mate," Yanuk said sullenly. "It's his own fault that I'm alone. He could have made one of the others immortal."

Gene translated this to the others and explained about their presence.

"So you're from another world?" Yanuk asked. "Hm-m-m—I wonder. It wasn't an accident, or it'd happen oftener. I imagine that Orcher had a

hand in it. Yes, I'm sure. Here," he left his chair and shuffled over to Gene, pushing his face close to the young man's. "Let me look in your eyes. Yes, I thought so. You don't know it, but you're already acquainted with Orcher." He returned to his chair. "That's the reason that you can understand me, and these others can't. In touching you, Orcher did something to you—don't ask me what. For all my centuries I'm only a beginner."

"And what does this Orcher look like?" Gene asked.

"His image is down in the temple," Yanuk said. "Would you like to see it?"

Gene asked Siwara. She nodded to Yanuk. "Come then," he said, starting out of the room.

They went down the stairs. They did not return to the garden. Yanuk led them into a dusty hall. He clucked his blunt red tongue disapprovingly at the dust. "You'll have to excuse my negligence —I bother to come here so seldom that I don't keep it clean."

They reached the titanic entrance to the temple. It was as huge as the men had described it. Siwara clung close to Gene, and at sight of the weird outline carved above the altar she shivered and her grip tightened. Yanuk slapped her hearteningly—and heartily—on the back. She gulped.

"There's nothing to fear. My people are responsible for that. It took them years to make. I think it's silly." Gene translated.

"Does the—god—dwell within it?" Siwara asked.

"Oh, no! He's too busy elsewhere around the various universes. It's bad enough being cooped up on an island. I can't imagine anything worse than inhabiting a block of stone," Yanuk said. Though Gene conveyed Yanuk's words to Siwara, she was not convinced. At sight of the dread symbol on the wall, Kaspel had kneeled; his eyes were closed; his lips moved without sound as though he were praying. And now Siwara joined him.

"Tell them to get up and not be so infantile," Yanuk said with a touch of impatience. Gene bent over Siwara and laid his hands on her arms to lift her up; she shook his hands away—and then it happened.

They had forgotten Froar. He had not bowed. His sharp eyes indeed were somehow akin to the inexpressible cruelty of the grotesque stony outline. He had stared straight ahead, smiling thinly, and now—as Gene bent over Siwara, and Kaspel's attention was absorbed in prayer, he lifted his fettered hands.

There were about six inches of chain between the iron wristlets. Froar held his hands together and swung them down. The chain cracked on Kaspel's head, and the old man toppled over without a sound. Froar's movements were swift. As Gene looked up, Froar bent, snatched Kaspel's knife, then stepped forward, made a hoop of his arms and brought them down around Siwara, prisoning her. He leaped back, dragging the girl up with him before Gene could barely comprehend what was happening.

Blood coursed from Kaspel's head, making black mud of the dust. As Gene's hand found his sword's hilt, Froar stepped back, hauling Siwara with him. He grinned unpleasantly.

"Don't draw your sword. And you"—to Yanuk, who was approaching—"you keep away! If you come closer, I'll knife our little Siwara. And you wouldn't like that, would you?"

Gene's sword flashed out but he handled it awkwardly. Froar drew back, still sneering.

"Careful you don't cut yourself!"

Siwara writhed in Froar's embrace. "Froar! What are you trying to do?"

He touched her breast with the knife. "Careful, little princess! You're going back to the ship with me."

Siwara panted, "The men will kill you!"

Froar laughed. The sound was like pebbles rattling down a hillside. "They won't as long as I have you with me like this."

Gene took a forward step. Froar was edging back through the doorway of the temple, into the hall. "Keep back!" Froar warned.

Gene halted. "Why? If you kill Siwara, you won't be able to get on the ship. All your chances of safety lie in keeping her alive. A dead princess is of no use to you, Froar, as you once confided to me—remember?"

"And a dead sweetheart is of no use to you," Froar countered, still inching back.

It was checkmate. Gene turned to Yanuk, who had been watching with more pleasure than anything else. Yanuk stretched out a hand, his fingers splayed. For a second, nothing happened. Then his fingertips glowed with a bluish light which strengthened, gathered into a little ball, and drifted idly across space toward Froar.

Siwara was wide-eyed, frightened. Froar ducked, jerking the girl with him. The little ball of light followed him, touched his forehead and spread out as though melting on his skin. It sunk into his flesh like water into a blotter.

Froar shot upright. Siwara cried out. Froar stood, his eyes staring vacantly, the knife forgotten, dropping from his hands. Gene rushed to him, lifted the lax hands, pulled Siwara away. He sheathed the sword, held the princess close.

"Siwara!"

She huddled against him, weeping silently. Yanuk surveyed them with a sentimental smile.

"Wonderful thing, love!" his child's voice cooed. "Well, come along. I'll show you The Machine." He bent over Kaspel. "This man's dying."

Gene released Siwara and knelt over the old man, glancing anxiously at Froar.

"He won't hurt you," Yanuk assured, noting the glance. "For convenience's sake we'll say that he's hypnotized." He drew Kaspel back, touching the bloody head. "I wish that I could help your friend. But the blow was forceful—his skull is broken." He wagged his head sorrowfully.

Siwara dropped beside Kaspel, laid her head on his chest. He was still breathing. He did not open his eyes. He lay limp. The blood had stopped flowing. Suddenly he shuddered violently, moved as though to sit up. He seemed to cough. Nothing more. He fell back. "He's dead," Yanuk said.

They were silent a moment. Then Siwara raised her eyes. She had become very pale. "Kaspel's dead," she said. "But he died serving Nanich! He was praying to the one you call Orcher to help us in the coming war with Koph! Ah, if only his prayers are heard! You say that you can summon this Orcher. Then call him! Let me pray to him! Kaspel must not have gone like this"—her voice broke—"for nothing." She flashed to her feet, her hands clutching the handle of Gene's sword. "Froar I will kill, myself! The beast! The ruthless, murderous beast—" But Gene gripped her hands, gravely shaking his head. Yanuk arose, shrugging.

"It will do no good. Let him live and suffer. Now he knows nothing, sees nothing—"

Slowly her fury ebbed. Then she turned to Yanuk. "Call your god!" She glanced at the altar. "Call your god!" she repeated, and started forward.

Yanuk and Gene started after her. Froar stood like a carved and painted manikin, his eyes empty.

They reached the huge slab that was the altar. Yanuk's arm brushed off the dust as he moved around the edge of it. The six-inch layer of glass housed intricate machinery that vaguely resembled the insides of a clock. Having brushed off the dust as far as he could reach, Yanuk climbed on the glass and walked on his knees, sweeping the slab comparatively clean. This done, he dismounted and stood peering at the device. It was ten by thirty feet, six inches thick.

"It has no starting lever," he explained to Gene, softening his voice as the tail of his eye glimpsed Siwara, her face in her hands. "The controlling switch is inside, so no one can accidentally start it. Only I know how to operate it. Thus!"

He pointed. Again the blue luminosity appeared at his fingertips. The sphere of light floated like a bubble from his fingertips and to the glass, sinking through it without difficulty. It touched one of the cogs, and faded away. But the cog whirled with a faint clicking, setting in motion the other wheels. The ticking increased in varying rhythms, spreading like a ripple of sound over the slab's pond of silence as the motion of each wheel started a fresh one turning. The clicking loudened, running the gamut of audibility, swift and shrill, slow and deep, until it seemed that all the clocks that had felt the hand of man had been assembled in that place.

"And is that all?" Gene asked, his arm now around Siwara, who had stopped weeping to watch, cold-eyed.

"It's all that I do," Yanuk said. "But—look."

A blue haze was surrounding The Machine. The whirring wheels seemed to be spinning out threads of light. And as if the tickings were fingers, they pulled on the threads of radiance, weaving them, strand on strand into a complex pattern that strengthened with every revolution of the myriad cogs.

Brighter and brighter grew that pattern of light, suspended an inch or so above the glass-faced machine. Brighter and brighter, until its glory hurt the eyes. Then a little blue spark appeared on the pulsing web, raced over the convolutions like a frenzied spider on a tangled web, swelling larger and larger.

Gene and Siwara gasped. Yanuk folded his arms on his round stomach and beamed with satisfaction. The blue spark became the size of a large star, then a moon, then larger. And as the orb swelled to the size of a human being, Gene stepped back—and Siwara recoiled with him. Still the blue brilliance expanded, its edges irregular scallops that flamed large and small, constantly altering in size. Was it really a globe, or flat? There was no way of determining.

Ah, but it was huge now—and still growing! It quivered all over like a light reflected on perturbed water, its ragged edges keeping time to the multitude of tickings. It was of light—yet it did not brighten the walls of the temples nor throw shadows behind the watching three. It grew greater and greater still, and as it enlarged, Gene and the princess, and Yanuk, too, drew back until they were again at the threshold of the temple, Froar behind them, still rigid, still unseeing.

The blue glow had become the size of the immense carving on the wall behind the altar. It hung in the air, shaking. One of its streamers lengthened downward, touched the pattern, which vanished. Instantly the ticking was still.

Then a voice pulsed through the vast room. Did they hear it? Or was it in their minds, its import coursing the channels of their brains? It was like the light of countless stars condensed and magnified, like a contrapuntal melody played on an organ which sent light instead of air through pipes made from cylindrical diamonds.

"Yanuk—I have come. And I am displeased. Did I not tell you never to call me except at the command of one of my kind?"

The voice of Orcher!

X.

Orcher's musical voice was enlivening, like a psychic wind which fanned the fires of life into a fiercer heat. Though it was tainted by nothing remotely resembling humanity, it was colored with passions, but passions no human could ever hope to know, so intense that at their faintest they would have blasted a mortal's body into atoms. And though the strange entity was only a great splash of light, Gene knew that it had eyes. They were fastened on Yanuk, who lifted an apologetic claw.

"I beg your pardon, Orcher." Was Yanuk speaking, or conversing mentally? The air of the room was rippling, distorting everything, thoughts and actions. Yanuk's claw waved toward the princess. "These people have come to ask your help in a problem confronting them."

Orcher's secret eyes swept Gene and Siwara, dwelt briefly on Froar and the body of Kaspel.

"Yes, I see," he said. A discordant note merged with the harmonies of his voice. "You little nothings, to interrupt me at my work! How did you dare? Do you think that I am interested in your troubles? And supposing I were? If I helped you what could you give me?" The voice swelled pridefully. "I have desires that you cannot even imagine! I can make a world of people like you in a breath, and crush it with a thought! All that you have to offer was mine until I discarded it. And yet you come to me, to ask a favor of me!"

The temple rocked with his laughter; the air throbbed in gusts that tore at the humans' clothing, disheveled Siwara's hair.

"I am Orcher!" the entity said. "I have seen many suns come and go. I have watched life as it appeared on this earth—first, flaming life that inhabited this molten, newborn planet! And that life died. Then the plant life that walked and thought and built its little cities—and that life passed. I saw a reptile race appear and disappear in the space of millions of years, and watched you little humans climb the ladder of life from the specks of jelly that wriggled in the oceans. And I have been amused by all of you. So little! So puny in all your efforts—and so unthinking! And yet—" The discordance blurred away. "Yet I feel a sympathy for you at times. For some of you have tried so hard to be like—me! You would roam the stars, altering their courses to suit your whims, and you cannot, and doubtless never will. For you are limited by your bodies and the demands of your bodies. Toys of evolution." His attention focused on Yanuk. "I could shift the path of that evolution, Yanuk, as I have done with you. I could wither your body into nothingness and set an armor of light about your soul that it might be free to traverse space. But I would rather not experiment with you. The doing must be yours. Were I to set you free, the memory of what had been, might torment you with desire for the old way, the small, unthinking easy way—not the way of thought. And what would you do then? Nothing constructive, I'm sure. And you might get in my way, hindering my researches. So it cannot be.

"No, you must alter yourselves by your own efforts if you would be like me. If not, I am not concerned. So soon will you perish and be forgotten! All that I will do for you is teach you, by pointing out the right path.

"You whom they call princess—you come to me for aid in the fighting of a war. Too bad that you did not come to me ages ago, when I was interested in the emotions of humans, but you were not alive then. Now the thought does not much stir me. What do I care for your wars? What good will their outcome spell for me? If you win it does not matter. If you lose—well, you have lost, and that is all. And yet, I'll admit that I am interested. Why? Because this country of yours what do you call it? Nanich? This country of yours is following the trail to freedom by education and experiment. In the centuries to come it might eventually produce a mind like mine.

"And the enemy country—Koph. I don't like its motives at all! It would keep the minds of its people in darkness in order to gain material things. And that is retrogression. No, I don't like it! In a small way—oh, infinitely small, I assure you—your country's aims are akin to mine. You would achieve spiritual greatness, even as I am constantly seeking to better myself. I like that! Yes, I like it very much. But"—the melodic voice darkened into somber chords—"this Koph has nothing about it that pleases me. Rather, its concepts anger me. And I have little time for anger. It conflicts with my principles. Yes, the more I think of it—the more I adjust my views to your perspective—the angrier I become!

"But I am just. I cannot stamp out these enemies of yours. Not all of them. For not all of them can be willing to live as they are living. They are only the slaves of their masters, doing as they have been bid lest life be taken from them.

"So I will promise you this. I will end this war when it begins. But I will do it after my own fashion, which you may find a trifle—drastic. And after that there will be no more wars. You may be certain as to that. No more wars—Koph and Nanich will join hands in peace and fraternity.

"Don't bow to me, princess. I am no god. Fear me and you are walking backward into the darkness of superstition. Endeavor to understand me, and you will be raising yourself toward resemblance to me."

If a blotch of light could lift its forefinger in

admonishment, Orcher was doing it. "Mind this! I will answer your call but once! You are not to cry out to me except in your deepest need!" The blue glory sank down on the glass which Yanuk had called The Machine. "This device which summons me—it's too ponderous for you to take to your homeland. I'll make you something more compact—a little token in which I shall center a wisp of my intelligence, a link to me, wherever I may happen to be. You will be able to use it but once. So!"

An invisible wave of force brushed the princess and Gene, Yanuk and Froar and the body of Kaspel back from the temple, out into the hall. The wavering light that was Orcher floated down from the platform, halted in the center of the floor. Did it whirl? Was it standing still? There was no way of knowing. Its ragged edges quivered like restless flames, that was all. But on the floor under it the dust began to crawl, faster and faster, like sluggish gray water swirling around in a vortex, becoming a whirlpool. A column of dust rose like a tiny tornado, and all the dust in the room crept over the floor into the revolving column.

A tendril of Orcher's blue effulgence dipped down, obscuring the tornado—and where it had been lay a jewel large as a man's head. It might have been a sapphire in its clear blue translucence.

It was a miniature replica of Orcher's outlines. A knobbed and spiky gem glittering with starry reflections.

The unseen wave carried the watchers back into the temple.

"My token!" Orcher said. "When you have need of me—break it, and I will come. It may be heavy—you'd better carry it, Yanuk. Which means that you're to accompany these folk to Nanich—it's about time you broadened yourself with a journey away from this island. There will be no one to mind The Machine while you're away—but you won't be gone long, I promise you. And now I must go back to the universe that I was making. It's an especially difficult one, and I can't leave it for any length of time."

The radiance dimmed, then flashed back into full glory. It peered down on Gene.

"Why, I know this man! Only a little while ago, when I was combing the dimensions for material to use in the building of my universe, I—you might say, stumbled. Yes, I stumbled, and in the act I threw out energies that temporarily upset the laws of both his world and this. It welded them together for an instant, and he slipped through the opening. He was drowning, I believe. I hadn't time to set him back—my needs were urgent—so I touched him with a little of my power, that he might meet the requirements of this world if they differed from those of his. Well!" Orcher's music became the quick, crisp notes of laughter. "And so he has found his way here, back to me! Tell me, little man—do you want to go back to your own place? Decide quickly, but with care—I'll not ask again."

'Gene looked down at Siwara's face. Her eyes were wistful. "No," he said. "I'll stay here."

"Excellent!" Orcher approved. "And now I must be going—" But Siwara drew from Gene's embrace, took a forward step, lifting her hand.

"Oh, but wait!" She dropped on her knees, her head drooping in shame. But her voice was determined. "Orcher, forgive me. But there is one thing more that I would ask, something close to my heart. It is this man here." She pointed to Kaspel's body. "He lies dead, slain by Froar. He was my teacher, even as you have taught Yanuk. And he lies dead. Orcher, have you the power to bring him back to life?"

The glory darkened, as though fading away. Its voice was pensive. "I like you for that, princess. I wonder if Yanuk will pray to a greater power if something should happen to me! But, no. I have told you that I am no god. I cannot give life to what I have not made, only a semblance of life. And that you would not want. To see this man walking and hear his voice, and know that he is without a soul! You would fear and hate him. His soul has been drawn from his body—it is not a matter for my doing—I regret it, but I cannot help you."

Siwara sobbed; there was a film over Gene's eyes. Orcher's radiance quivered, and grew pale. It vanished—there were only his outlines carved on the wall of the temple.

They were immobile, all of them, for a long time. Then Gene stepped over to Siwara and drew her to her feet. Yanuk shuffled over to the blue jewel. He lifted it, and even with his great strength he found it heavy.

"We will bury the body in my garden, beside the brook," Yanuk said. He turned to Froar. Something of the man's self was returning to him; his eyes were alert. But when Yanuk said, "Carry the dead man," to him, Froar strode mechanically over to the corpse and lifted it.

Yanuk went ahead with the jewel, Froar following. Gene and Siwara lagged behind, the princess clinging again to Gene, her tearful face against one of his shoulders. They left the temple and went through the halls into the golden sunshine of the garden.

Froar laid the body on the moss beside the stream. While Gene and Yanuk gathered moss and the pearly stones from the brooklet to cover Kaspel, Siwara wandered away from them, disappeared among the tangled masses of flowers. Gene and Yanuk covered the body, and Siwara returned with an armful of silvery blossoms.

Silently she laid them on the grave, then knelt beside it, her head bowed to her breast.

She arose. "Now we will go back to the ship," she said without emotion. Gene bent to take up the blue jewel and found that he could not budge it. But Yanuk was able to lift it. Then he set it down.

"I think," he remarked, "that if I am leaving this place, I'd better take along some clay. You may not have anything as good in your Nanich. And I might want to amuse myself. So—one moment."

He went down the mossy bank, walked a little upstream and scooped out great handfuls of clay, patting them into a ball. The others watched. The ball became larger, and still Yanuk added to it. When it was a yard in thickness he straightened. "That ought to do." He cleansed his paws in the stream, walked back to them, lifted the jewel. He looked back at the mass of clay, jerking his head as though it were responsive to his summons. Siwara gasped. The ball stirred, as though someone were pushing it; swayed and began to roll. It wabbled up the stream's bank and over to Yanuk.

"No," he said. "Go ahead of us." The ball rolled past him weightily and out of the garden. "And now you," Yanuk said to Froar. The man in red strode stiffly after the ball. Then Gene and Siwara proceeded, Yanuk behind them with the gem.

They went through the dim, dusty halls, the rolling clay clearing a path for them, and out into the dead city's streets. They passed through the colossal gateway and down the paved avenue that led to the sea.

The men waiting on the beach hailed them, then fell silent. They saw the ball of clay, the blue gem glittering weirdly in Yanuk's hands. From a distance they had thought that Yanuk might be Kaspel. Four had entered the city, and four were leaving it. But what was that round thing bounding toward them, they asked each other.

At the sight of Yanuk, one of them screamed. The fishman widened his mouth in a reassuring grin, but it did not allay their fear of him.

Siwara could understand Yanuk's words since the appearance of Orcher in the temple. She spoke to the cowering seamen, "He will not hurt you. He is our friend. We have secured help for Nanich."

"Princess!" One of them was barely able to speak; the others huddled together, their eyes wide. "Princess, is—that thing—going back with us to the ship?" He traced a cabalistic symbol with his hand in the air, as though to fend off an evil enchantment.

"He won't hurt you," Siwara repeated, aided not at all by Yanuk's eager murmurs. She stepped into the boat, drawing Gene after her. He glanced at the clay, which halted, trembled, and leaped into the boat with a thud that cracked the small craft's planking.

Yanuk sat on the forward seat, the jewel in his lap, and Froar was normal enough to board the boat without command. He was forced to sit beside Yanuk, but he drew as far away from the creature as possible, his face sullen, his eyes contemptuous. He tucked his chains into the folds of his sleeves, the chains that had killed Kaspel.

"Come aboard," Siwara said to her men. "Push off. We must hurry to Nanich."

The men held a whispered consultation among themselves before obeying. The boat swayed out toward the anchored galley.

Yanuk eyed Siwara's ship with interest. As they neared it, the men aboard called out in welcome—and were silent. As they hauled the boat over the ship's side they stared in horrified fascination at Yanuk, whose face was becoming mournful.

"They don't like me," he confided to Gene. "I'm a freak to them. Now I know that I was wise not to have left my garden before." He gazed at the island in nostalgia. "If Orcher hadn't ordered me to come I'd go back there. I was lonely, yes, but at least nobody feared me."

They stepped out on the planking, Froar standing aloof. The princess held up a hand. "Call everyone out on deck! I wish for them to meet our new friend."

Yanuk raised the blue gem high; the sunlight glinted from it, throwing splashes of blue over the deck and the crowding people.

"I take possession of this ship in Orcher's name!" he cried. "I dedicate it to him and his works for the peace of Nanich!" The crew watched silently.

The princess turned. "Is the sail mended, the mast repaired? Then let us be off for Nanich."

Froar laughed, the sound like bits of stone shaken in a tin box. "Let us be off for Nanich!" he repeated harshly. The men stared at him as he rocked with mirth, glancing at the princess' face, which was set with hatred; they murmured darkly, clenching their hands. Their mumbles arose to threats against Froar. But a shake of the princess' head calmed them.

Froar ceased laughing. "You're a little too late, Siwara. It was arranged that Koph's war fleet would start for Nanich a week after you embarked for Koph! My agents are taking care of your military leaders in Nanich. And your people are without a ruler to guide them—you cannot get back in time."

He laughed again, his chains rattling as he slapped a thigh. "Oh, yes, let's be off for Nanich—if Nanich still exists!"

Siwara's touch designated two men. to his quarters."

As they led him away, Froar looked over a shoulder. "What use is your sorcerer and his magic?" he gibed. "Do you think that he can help you—now?"

XI.

Great cloud cities towered, terrace upon terrace, into the duskening sky. The ship's sails were curved in a smooth breeze; its prow sliced through the dimpling water. The island had dwindled away into the misty horizon, its spires fingering the clouds until they had run together into a splotch of gray whose hard lights and sharp shadows, veiled by the tremulous atmosphere, paled to a blur. The warm light of sundown tinted the domes of the clouds.

Siwara and Gene were dining on the upper deck, the maid Marza serving them. She had pieced together from some old robes an outfit of shirt and trousers for Gene; he wore them proudly. Siwara, sipping pale wine from a slim glass, set the liquid down and touched Gene's chest, her eyes sparkling.

"You look—different! I like you this way! But I'm not so sure that it's the clothing alone which does it. I think"—she mused over him—"that the change is in your face, your bearing. You were so shy, so—boyish—when we took you aboard this ship, Gene. How long ago was it? A week? A little longer? And yet look at you! You've added years to your age—you're a man now. And you're so certain of yourself. Yes," she said softly, "I like it."

Gene took her hand from his chest, pressed its fingers. "Yes—and if you'd told me not very long ago that I'd be on this ship, in love with someone like you, Siwara, I'd have laughed. It would have seemed fantastic. And here I am. It seems that anything can happen here—and does."

She snatched back her hand, feigning displeasure. "Don't you want to be in love with me?"

He did not need to reply; his eyes were answer enough. "It's not a question of wanting to love you. I just can't help myself," he confessed.

That pleased her. She smiled, returning her hand. "If someone had told me as we left Nanich that I was going to meet you, to love you—I would have been furious! After all, who are you? A nobody from another world. And I am the highest of my people. And yet—you're a man, a real one; what more could a princess want?"

Unexpectedly, Marza laughed. She was loading used dishes on a tray, clearing the table. It was a happy laugh; her eyes admired Gene. Siwara patted her understandingly. "Marza's glad for me, aren't you?" she asked the maid. Marza nodded.

Yanuk climbed up the little stair to them, several of Siwara's books under his arm, a little wooden coffer in his hands. He dropped down heavily on a cushion and crossed his legs, tailor style, making a comfortable nest for his paunch. He was wearing one of Froar's scarlet robes, and it was evident that he had become quite conceited. He ran a scaly claw over the embroidered silk, his goggling eyes on the princess' face. "You like it?"

"You look wonderful, Yanuk," the princess murmured soothingly.

Yanuk looked at Gene.

"I think so, too," Gene said.

"I've been thinking," Yanuk said. "I never paid much attention to wearing apparel before—I had no reason to, there on that lonesome island. But I want people to like me—I've got to impress them. Siwara, what do you call those jewels hanging from your ears?"

"Earrings," she said.

"Well, I've been thinking. Don't you feel that I'd look better if the back of my robe were cut low, so that my crest would show? It's really a very nice crest—I think I have the best crest that ever existed. The spines are so clearly marked. Most of my people had short spines, and the webbing wasn't as delicate."

He touched his finny ridge with pleasure. "Now if my robe could expose it all, then I could take those jewels—earrings—and hang one on each spine. Don't you think that I'd cut quite a figure?" He was smiling, whether with vanity or sly humor they could not determine. He opened the little wooden box which he had brought, withdrawing a needle and a twist of thread. He started ripping pages out of Siwara's books. "I wish you'd mention it to your maid, princess. I tried to make myself clear to her, but she isn't able to understand me."

"Yanuk, what are you doing to my books?" Siwara asked in dismay.

"I thought I'd make me a bird," he said, heedless of her concern. "I need the paper." He drew a poniard from his belt and laying a page on the planking, ran the blade over it, cutting the paper into the shape of a leaf.

"A bird?" Gene asked. "Can you make it fly, Yanuk?"

The creature nodded, busy at cutting paper. Then he threaded his needle, squinting one pop eye and sliding his round tongue out of the side of his mouth in concentration. He pulled the thread triumphantly through the needle's eye. "There!" He began to sew the leafy bits of paper together, creating a jumbled mass of scraps loosely linked by the thread.

They watched him for a while, Marza reluctantly carrying away her tray with backward glances. Then Siwara put a hand to her forehead. "I feel guilty. Here we are enjoying ourselves, and Nanich's many lengths away. We must get there soon! On the surface I may seem to be happy, but in my heart, down here"—she touched her breast gravely—"I'm not so very light.

Something there keeps saying, 'We must get to Nanich! We must get to Nanich!' And I wish that, like your bird, Yanuk—I could fly."

A thought occurred to Gene, brushing seriousness over his face as though it were a paint-streaked hand. "Yanuk—could you make a bird large enough to carry us to Nanich?"

Yanuk looked up from his sewing. "I'm afraid not. I'm not that great a magician. It will take all my energies to make this little bird fly. The dolls are easy. But I haven't tried many birds. You see, I send my thought out with the bird—it's the intensity of my thought that flaps the wings; once it's in the air, I'll have to keep my mind fixed on it, or else it'll fall into the sea. And it can't go far—it can fly but half a day. I can't keep it up any longer. But it will go swiftly, faster than most birds, and in its head I will put two little eyes of clay. I will see through them. If Nanich lies ahead—the eyes will tell me."

The shape on which he was sewing had become a bird at last, a large white bird which hung limply over one of the fishman's knees, its wings spread laxly like opened fans. Yanuk made it no beak. "It will need no mouth," he said.

He held up the loose figure. It was about the size of a gull, its head drooping on a long neck as though it were a real bird which someone had shot. For there was a look of life in it. Yanuk scraped some of the paper feathers with the poniard's edge, curling them.

"Now it's ready to go," he said. The sun was very low, its red light shimmering on his face. "Now I'll go back to my room and leave the door open. I'll lie on the bed, the bird on my breast—and life will come to it. You'd like to see? Then come along."

Gene arose, reaching his hand to Siwara; she grasped it and he pulled her up. With the sunset glow on her cheeks she was very beautiful. Her large dark eyes were wide with wonder.

Yanuk grunted laboriously as he lumbered erect, the bird in one hand, the ripped books and the box in the other. They descended the narrow stair to the main deck, and entered the cabins. Yanuk occupied the room which had been given Gene after his rescue.

A finger of dying sunlight pried through the windows, spotlighting the low bed and its canopy. Yanuk dropped Siwara's books and the sewing kit on one of the chairs near the door. He lay on the bed, tastefully arranging the folds of his robe around him. He put the bird across his chest.

He cocked his head. "I must warn you—I'll seem to be asleep. Don't disturb me or I may lose control over my bird—it'll drop into the sea, and I can't fly it if it's wet. Stay by me, and listen. I'll tell you what I see. When I can't hold on any longer, I'll awake without help. You watch." He dropped his head on the soft pillows.

Gene found a chair for the princess. She sat down, straining forward to eye the papery bird.

The shaft of sunlight thinned, lifting as the descending sun levered it. The shaft dimmed, turned ruby red and died away as the sun dropped behind the sea. Purple gloom stalked about the chamber, hanging its walls with tapestries of shadow. Yanuk did not stir; he was evidently asleep. The bird lifted and lowered on his chest as he breathed; the slight motion suggested that the bird itself was breathing.

The room darkened. The bird was a white blur. And then it stirred. Its head lifted on the long neck, regarded Gene and the princess intently a moment, then swiveled its head to look down upon Yanuk's face. It waggled its head from side to side in comic approbation of what it saw, and lifted a wing, thrust the head under the wing as though preening its feathers, producing a dry rustling of paper. It folded the wing, spread it, testing it. Then it unfurled the other wing, lifted it, beat the air with it several times, the paper feathers whispering. The white bird nodded, satisfied.

It flapped the wings and glided off Yanuk's chest, sailing over the princess' head; Gene involuntarily ducked, and the bird liked that. It swept about the room, shot back toward Gene and missed him narrowly as he crouched to avoid it. Then it fluttered to the doorway and through it.

Siwara started out of her chair: she and Gene strode after the bird, which flapped down the passageway, out on the deck. Gene and the princess halted at the door of the passage, staring up.

The bird was wheeling over the ship. It dived, swooped between the round-cheeked sails, lifted and skittered on a slant over the man at the tiller; he cowered and raised his hands to beat it off. Then the paper wings crackled as the flying thing started away from the ship, gliding straight toward the glow that hung above the vanished sun.

Gene and the princess hastened to the side of the vessel, leaned on the rail, watched it go. Smaller and smaller it became, swifter its flight, until it was only a moving mote. It vanished into the afterglow.

They hurried back to Yanuk. In the murky room he lay motionless. Then his half moon of a mouth sagged open. He mumbled softly.

"What's he saying?" Siwara asked.

They bent over him.

"So nice, this flying," Yanuk muttered. "Wish I could try a bigger bird—but I haven't the power. The wind's strong—I hadn't thought of that. Should have weighted this thing with more clay.

Now I'm going fast, fast—no real bird could fly like this!"

He was silent a long time.

"How far I'm going! The sun seems to be rising—I'm overtaking it in its march. Like another dawn. This is wonderful! If only I had the strength, I'd be always like this, free in the air, flying, flying, keeping track with the sun, never knowing darkness!"

He spoke again. "Nothing but sea and sky." Gene looked across the scaly body to the small windows. The blackening sky was punctuated by stars. "Like another dawn," Yanuk was murmuring dreamily. "The sun seems higher. I must go faster, faster!" His voice slurred into silence. Then, "What's that? Something off there to the side!" His tone was alarmed; his body twitched as though he was waking. "Ships!"

Gene and Siwara stared at each other. The room was totally dark; they could not possibly see each other, but they sensed each other's surprise. Gene fumbled over the wall for the lamp's bracket, found it; he took a fire tongs from his pocket and touched the ends of it to the wick. Flame sprouted, throwing amber light on the bed, glinting on Siwara's gown and hair. He went back to the princess.

"Ships!" Yanuk breathed sharply. "There seem to be hundreds of them! I'm closer now. Siwara, Gene, can you hear me! You're so far away—back there. Why, it must be night where you are! Here the sun is only setting. These are odd-looking craft—they're so much bigger than your ship, Siwara. Their sails are up, two to a mast, and men are rowing. There are two banks of oars on some of them.

"I'm weakening—but I'll try to get closer. How strange they are in shape! Here, I mustn't falter so. What's wrong?" Yanuk stirred. "The thread is cutting into the paper—I'm molting!" He laughed shortly. "Yes, their shapes are strange. They're long and lean; the bows lift up in a high curve on each of them, like scimitars. And they glint in the light—why, the curved fronts are plated with sharp metal." Yanuk's voice shuddered. "I don't like that. They're ominous. If one of those prows should strike a ship, it would slice it like a knife cleaving a fruit!

"There go some more feathers. I can't keep myself up. Gene, Siwara back there—ever so far. Hope I can get to them. I'm falling. I don't like this . this swirling about. It makes me giddy. Looks like the sky and ocean have gone mad. Now I'm in the water. Funny. I can't feel it. I'm floating like a gull. Those ships are coming this way, Siwara. You'll meet them.

"I'm being dragged into the water. My magic won't work in there. The water does something to it—I mustn't let myself be dragged down. I'll have to abandon this bird shape—go back to Siwara. Ah!" He ended in a little wail that grew fainter and fainter as though his voice were being carried away into illimitable distance.

Gene and Siwara huddled over him anxiously. Gene shook the scaly body. Then Yanuk's paws brushed his hands away; Orcher's creature arose, sat on the bed looking up at them.

"Those ships!" Gene said, his eyes querying Siwara.

"Ships of Koph!" she murmured. "Yanuk—how many were there?"

He shrugged. "Fifty? A hundred? A hundred seems more like it." He looked from one to the other. "It seems strange, being back here with you. I was flying, flying!" He fluttered his hands. "It was wonderful. Siwara, you're pale. You're frightened. What's wrong?"

"Those ships," she said. "Koph's war fleet! It can't be anything else. And you say that they're coming this way!"

"Diagonally, yes," Yanuk answered. "They're a good deal behind and to one side—but they're apt to meet us." He pressed his elbows convulsively to his sides. "I'm thinking of what they'll do if they ram us," he confessed soberly.

"The winds pretty strong," Gene said. "If we set the men to rowing, we may outdistance them. Shall I tell Miskal, Siwara?"

She nodded. "Yes! Oh, yes!"

He started out of the cabin. Yanuk dragged himself from the bed, stood up, stretching. Then he went over to a corner of the room, where his ball of clay was lying. He gouged out a handful.

"What are you doing to do?" Siwara asked.

"I'm thinking," he said slowly, "of what might happen if those ships reach us. I'm going to make some little surprises in case we have to fight!"

XII.

The sky was black; in the starlight the sails were insubstantial silhouettes. The men were rowing; the ship was hissing over the waves. The rhythmic clang of the hortator's triangle knifed the wind. Gene turned from the rail, started for Siwara's cabin—

He heard a scream! A man had cried out raucously, hoarse with terror. The door to Froar's quarters banged on the wall as it was flung open; banged again. Steps raced down the passageway. The two men in charge of Froar rushed out as if lava were flowing after them, searing their heels. One of them thudded against Gene, throwing him off balance. They crashed to the deck.

Gene scrambled to his feet. The other man had run to the fore of the ship; the rowers' heads jerked up after him.

The other guard lay huddled on the floor, weak with terror. Gene tugged on him, trying to lift

him. The man was almost a dead weight. Set on his feet, he clung to Gene, pointing toward the cabins, his face white even in the darkness. He pointed, but he could not speak. His mouth gaped and shut; his breath slid from his lungs in little jerks.

Gene shook him, then turned to go. The man found his voice. "Devils! Devils in there! Your sorcerer is making magic!" He tore himself from Gene's grasp and raced after the other man to the ship's prow.

Gene strode into the passage. Froar's door was wide open; he could hear no sound within. He gazed in. Three little clay dolls scampered out into the passage, scuttled past him to Yanuk's half-open door.

There was another doll on the floor. It was crushed, as though in their haste, the men had trampled on it. There was little shape left to it now. It was only a wad of clay with a hand, a foot protruding. Yet the wad was alive; it drew itself up like a pygmy that had been melted in blasting heat and was not yet dead. It hobbled gruesomely on the one foot, swinging the smashed body like a second member. It, too, limped past Gene toward Yanuk's quarters.

Where was Froar? Gene stepped into the cabin. In the gentle lamplight the room seemed empty. Was he under the bed—hiding behind its canopy? Gene stepped forward. Perhaps Froar had leaped through one of the windows—

Something cracked down on his head; the blow glanced, but Gene was stunned. Froar, pressed flat against the wall inside the door, had swung his wrist chains down on Gene's head in the same way in which he had killed Kaspel. As Gene tottered, raising a hand dazedly to his head, Froar slipped out into the hall. Linked as his feet were by a short chain, the prisoner made speed, taking short, quick steps. Gene darted after him. As he reached the end of the passage, Froar was at the rail of the ship. He leaned over it as though to throw himself into the sea—but two of the oarsmen had seen him, dropped the handles of their sculls and dashed forward. They seized Froar. The ends of the long sweeps which they had let go swung like clubs at the next benchful of oarsmen; they barely drew down in time, or the flying handles would have brained them. But Froar was safe.

Gene called to the two men that had deserted Froar, "Thuir! Scaur! Come back, you cowards!" There was a silence; then the men crept back. "Froar nearly got away. The little clay things wouldn't have hurt you."

Thuir said sullenly, "They were magic. They tried to steal our souls."

"Nonsense!" Gene said coldly. "Yanuk's our friend. He hasn't any use for your souls. Go back and watch Froar."

Scaur said, "The little things climbed down through the windows. They were teasing Froar. We tried to stop them and they turned on us."

"They won't come back," Gene promised. "Now take Froar to his cabin. And don't let him get away. Siwara can use him in Nanich."

"If we get there," Scaur said defiantly. "Miskal says that we're trying to beat Koph's war fleet."

"We won't if all the men are as afraid as you," Gene snapped. "Take Froar back."

Froar had changed. He was no longer assured; he stood with stooping shoulders, the hard lines of his face broken into lesser lines, like a weathered wood carving. But at the mention of Koph's fleet a spark returned to his eyes; imperceptibly he straightened. He went with the guards without reluctance, seemed almost glad to go back to his cabin.

Gene visited Yanuk. The sorcerer was seated on a chair beside his bed. Three little clay dolls lay on the bed. The fourth—the crushed one—was in his hands; he was molding it back into shape.

Gene said, "Yanuk—I suppose you were being playful. These dolls are probably commonplace things to you. But you frightened the men. You heard their screams, didn't you? Froar nearly got away—he was going to jump overboard."

Yanuk laid down the doll. "Oh! I heard them call out, but I thought that it was Froar. I wanted to worry him a little. He made fun of me, said that I couldn't help the princess. I thought I'd show him!"

Gene turned to go. "Well, in the future confine your magic to directly helping the princess."

Yanuk's eyes saddened; he left the chair, shuffled to Gene, laid a paw on his shoulder. "You're angry with me? I thought that I'd please you. Don't be angry with me. I'm homesick. You're my friend." Yanuk's voice was so worried, his odd face so depressed that Gene mustered a smile for him. He clapped a palm over Yanuk's hand.

"No, I'm not really angry, Yanuk. But don't do it again."

Yanuk shook his head solemnly—and sadly. "All right. I won't."

Gene nodded amiably and went to Siwara's cabin. The princess was seated before her low table, poring over brush marks on a bit of paper. She looked up, reached a hand to Gene, drew him down to her side.

"What's that?" He scanned the paper.

"I've been wondering—and worrying," she said. "Suppose Orcher is too busy with his universe to heed our summons? What can we do then? I believe that he meant it when he promised help to us—but I don't think that we ought to rest easily, putting our trust in him and doing nothing else. So I've been listing some things that we

might do when we reach Nanich—if we can get there before Koph's fleet." Her eyes traveled down the columns of writing.

"Where's the jewel?" Gene asked.

She leaned over, lifted a fold of her robe. The nodulated gem twinkled in the yellow lamp glow, cold blue stars serene in its depths. Gene dragged on it, managed to draw it a little closer. He bent over it, gazing into it. What was it but a jewel? Its cold fires suggested nothing of Orcher's vital azure ones. And yet—Orcher had said that it contained part of him which would be freed if the jewel were broken. That part of him would summon the remainder. He would come to them, help them at their greatest need.

Yet it was only a jewel.

Siwara was as doubtful as Gene. "Of course, we saw Orcher make the jewel from the dust on the temple floor," she said. "That ought to convince us. I don't doubt that Orcher will come if it's broken. At least, I think he means to come. But will he?" She raised her eyes to Gene. "Will he—remember? What is time to him? What are we to him? He called us puny little things, said that we don't really matter. He may have decided to help us on a whim—and he may have forgotten that whim. So—I'm planning."

"Did you hear shouts! Yanuk was playing with his clay toys. He frightened Froar's guards, and Froar got loose. He tried to drop over the rail into the sea."

She looked from her list to his face, startled. "No, I didn't hear. But that's . . . that's bad. We don't want Froar to escape." Her eyes hardened. "Not after what he's done to Kaspell Drowning in the sea's too good for him! I want him to live—live and repent what he's done." She laid her list down. "We'd better go to Froar."

Gene arose, assisting her up. "Tell me, Siwara—why do you always sit on cushions? Don't you think that chairs would be a little easier to get up from?"

She nodded. "You're quite right. I'd never thought much about it. In the old days, before the people of Nanich were free, it was only the men who sat in chairs, because they were the masters. The women didn't even have cushions, alas. The custom still prevails—but now it's a mark of distinction. The women loll about on soft pillows; the men sit on hard chairs."

They had ambled out of her rooms, down the hall to Froar's door. As they opened it, one of the guards stepped up questioningly, but recognizing them he drew back, let them pass. Froar lay on his bed, his hands under his head, staring up at the folds of the canopy. At their entrance he quickly slid his legs to the floor, stood stiffly, his mouth twisted unpleasantly. He bowed.

"So pleased to see you, my princess."

Siwara surveyed him scornfully. "So you wanted to kill yourself?"

He bent an assenting head. "Stupid of me, wasn't it? I won't try it again. Not when the war fleet of Koph is so near. I might be rescued—you might be my prisoner again, Siwara. No, I don't want to die."

"I'm glad to hear that, Froar," Siwara said sweetly. "I want you to live. I could have you killed. But I want you to live to see Koph beaten back, to regret your folly. We're not so powerless as you think." She was boasting now. "You probably don't know—Yanuk had you entranced at the time—but the great Orcher gave us something by which we can call him; he's promised to aid us against Koph. Occupy your mind with that for a while. And you men"—she turned to the guards—"watch him closely."

They did not answer, only stared at her. Were they leering? It seemed as if Froar's arrogance was infectious and had tainted them. She eyed them sharply. They wavered, hesitantly dipped in homage to her.

She touched Gene's arm, leaving the room. He followed; the door closed on them. "Now we'll stop in on Yanuk," she said. "If we acquaint him with the fortifications of Nanich, perhaps he can help us. I shouldn't have bragged like that—but the temptation was too great. Froar was so smug! And to think that once I trusted him!" She shook her head, mystified.

They knocked on Yanuk's door; he did not answer, and they pushed the portal in. Yanuk lay on his bed, writhing and moaning. The coverlets were disordered; as he twitched, he dragged them off the bed to the floor.

"Yanuk! What's wrong?" Gene rushed to the bed.

Yanuk did not answer promptly; only groaned again and turned on his side; a claw clenched on his robe at his chest, dragging on it, tearing it. Gene sniffed the air; it was faintly tinged with the perfume of withering flowers.

"The Vyras poison!"

Siwara put a hand to her cheek. "But we took away the vial of it that Froar carried. Where could he have found it?"

Gene dropped down beside the bed, hauled Yanuk to him, lifted the creature's head. "Yanuk! What's happened? Who gave you the poison?"

Yanuk relaxed in his hold, even attempting a smile. "One of the men," he said plaintively. "I was so happy! I thought they were beginning to like me! He came in and said he had something for me—a delicacy—and he gave me a little cake to eat. It was dampened with a green sirup that made my mouth tingle. I liked it. It ate it all up. And then suddenly I started to hurt. Something inside me wants to go to sleep, but I'm afraid to

sleep. I must keep moving! Moving! Because if I fall to sleep, I'm afraid I'll never awake again."

His eyes were filmed; he could barely keep them open. His head lolled, the eyelids lowered: he was asleep.

Gene straightened up. "Luckily he's immortal and—"

"Yes, but how immortal?" Siwara asked. "Surely he's not proof against everything. A sword could kill him, couldn't it? And what about the Vyras? A little of it's enough to kill a man—if he ate the cake and it was sodden with it, has he had enough to kill even him?"

She crossed her arms over her breast, shivering. "Now we'll have to rely upon Orcher's token! Gene, I'm frightened. Terribly frightened. My poor people!"

He held her against him, silent. She lifted her face.

"Who could have poisoned Yanuk? Are all our men so weak that they can be swayed from viewpoint to viewpoint with the wind of a whisper? We should have had Yanuk hypnotize Froar again—that would have put an end to this mischief! Perhaps I've been unwise, letting Froar live. He has no hostage value. Maybe we'd better kill him. I'll do it—and gladly! Poor Kaspel—" She was like a lithe cat, her eyes murderous, frightening. Unconsciously Gene drew away from her.

She lifted her chin at him. "You don't like that! You're afraid of the man! Well, you needn't worry. You won't have to kill him—I'll do that, and with the utmost pleasure!"

He put his hands on her arms. "I'm not afraid of him, Siwara. But I can't kill a man—at least not like this. It would be different if it were in a fight—"

"What about Kaspel? And Yanuk? Don't you owe them something? It was Kaspel who ordered you picked up from the sea!" Hotly she flung herself away from him, all princess, all hate.

Yanuk's eyes opened; he rolled on his back, his claws tearing at the air. He whispered. "How was I to know that I couldn't trust him? Living alone on the island, I'd forgotten all about such things—" His hands dropped; he was asleep again.

Siwara's hard face had not altered. She looked from Yanuk to Gene. "Froar tried to kill you, too," she reminded.

Gene tossed his head in annoyment. "Yes, I know, Siwara—but I can't walk in to Froar's room and kill him in cold blood! And you're not going to, either. He should have a trial—it should be done in the proper way—"

"I wonder whether I love you," she said dully. "If I did, I wouldn't care what you said. And I do care now. A trial! How do you think trials are settled in Nanich? Am I not qualified to judge Froar? Haven't I proof of his deeds? And yet you say—trial." She was an animal burning for blood.

"And I wonder if I love *you!*" he said curtly. "I think that maybe I was a fool, rejecting Orcher's offer to put me back where I came from!"

She was rigid, like a statue against which words were blown like fallen leaves. How could they affect her? Then her eyes glinted with tears. Her face was human again, and appealing. She drifted to him, laid a hand on his arm.

"Forgive me," she said. "I had forgotten—you're from another world. Your standards are different. You may have changed on the surface, but at heart you are the same. And I would have you as you are, truly yourself, unswayed by a woman's words." She looked down at Yanuk. "He's moving again. That's a good sign. The Vyras paralyzes first the will, then the involuntary muscles—the lungs, the heart."

Yanuk's weak voice reached them. "Get me a basin. I'm going to be very, very sick—in a minute."

Gene led the princess to the door. "You'd better go to your room, Siwara." She nodded dutifully and went out.

Yanuk retched; it made Gene ill to watch him. He coughed up green liquid, spat, then sank back. "I feel a little better," he sighed. "But the tingling—it's all over me—"

Gene patted him consolingly. "There's no antidote for Vyras, Yanuk, or we'd give it to you. I know what it's like—I had a touch of it once." He moistened his lips. "Yanuk—can you—are you still strong enough to work a little of your magic? Can you cast a spell on Froar, to keep him quiet?"

Yanuk's eyes strayed uncomprehendingly. Then he flopped out of Gene's grasp. "While I'm like this, I can't do anything," he groaned. "I can't put my mind to anything—only the pain, the pain." He dragged up his legs, curling up like a cat, his hands gripping his fat stomach.

"Could you try?" Gene asked.

"No I can't try!" Yanuk exploded pettishly. "Go away! Leave me! Let me die in peace!" He moaned. "Oh! And oh! And oh!" It was just a shade theatrical.

Gene left the bed, headed for the door. Miskal stumbled in. "Lights" he said. "A long line of them behind us. The fleet's gaining on us!" He tugged Gene's arm, drawing him down the hallway, out on deck. He pointed.

A row of lights twinkled on the horizon.

"Well, snap up the rowers!" Gene cried.

"We have! We've just changed the shifts—but the men are exhausted. A few of them are still too weary to row." Miskal's voice was shrill. "I've been serving my turn, too. We can't go any faster. And the breeze is dying down."

He swept a hand, indicating the loosely rippling sails.

Gene did not answer. He hurried to a vacant oarsman's seat, lifted the long sweep, rattled it down to the oarlock. He ripped open his shirt, baring his chest, moving in unison with the other men to the hasty *ting! tang! ting!* of the coxswain's triangle. Miskal took another empty seat on the opposite side of the ship; they dragged desperately on the oars.

One of the men up front fell forward, lay without moving. The handle of his sweep jerked with him, struck the man before him, knocking him from his bench. An oarsman quickly drew in his sweep, dragged in the other two, laid the unconscious man on the planking, and returned to his post.

Gene's shirt, wet with sweat, was glued to his arms and back; it ripped in his exertions. The ship crawled along. The greenish glow of dawn

tinged the eastern sky, lightened to cold gray. The ship crawled forward.

Panting, his breath rasping out in sobs, Gene lurched to his feet, hauled in his oar, and stared over the rail, clinging to it for support. The ships of Koph were nearer, now—hardly a mile away. They made a stripe across the sea, a line of dark hulks and a parallel band of empty sails. And in front of the ship was no line of land.

Miskal put away his oar. The others let their sculls drag, too weary to move, drooped exhausted.

"It's no use," Miskal said, dispiritedly. "We'll have to fight—and what chance have we got? It will be needless bloodshed. We might just as well set the ship on fire and leap into the sea. We haven't a chance. And it'd be far better than falling into the hands of Koph."

A ghastly picture veiled Gene's sight—the ship burning, the men floundering in the water, Siwara sinking into cold green depths, terror and anguish distorting her face as she reached her hands up to the wavering light from the surface, and slowly descended down to dreadful darkness and silence. He shook his head, answering Miskal, throwing the image from his mind.

"We'll fight," he said.

Miskal hailed the men. "All of you! Pull in the sweeps! Arm yourselves—get out the shields, the arrows that carry fire! Rouse the others! Quickly!"

He turned back to Gene as the men roused themselves and stumbled off to do his bidding. "We'll fight," he said, rocking with fatigue, clutching the rail. "If that's how you want it, we'll fight." He took a deep breath, stared at the line of ships.

Gene touched him, unable to speak, then weaved across the deck to the cabinway. He stopped in to see Yanuk. Orcher's servant lay quietly, his eyes bright.

"Feel any better?" Gene asked him. "Well enough to help us with a little magic? The fleet's close—we'll have to fight in a few minutes."

"I'm better," Yanuk said, "but I'm not well enough to work any wonders. I was trying." He lifted his hand; it trembled. "I can't summon the blue fire that should be there. I hope the poison hasn't destroyed my power. Perhaps later—" He was still in pain, but he was trying to hide it; perhaps he was ashamed of his exhibitionistic outburst a while back.

"Well, join us when you can," Gene said, and hurried out to Siwara's cabin.

The princess was lying on her bed, fully clothed, Marza on the floor beside the bed, leaning against it and nodding. Siwara sat upright. "They're close!"

"We'll have to fight," Gene said. "I'm no hand with a sword yet, Siwara—but I'll probably learn a lot this morning. Don't let them get you—"

She answered by touching a knife beside her. "I won't," she said. Her lips sweetened his. "My dear—my dear! Forgive me for the way I acted last night! If only I could take back those words. I love you! I love you—"

He gripped her very close. They kissed again, long and desperately. Then he released her, jerking his head toward the deck. "Stay here with Marza. I've got to go up there with the others." He saw the jewel. "I'll take this in to Yanuk."

He still was unable to lift it. He grasped one of its rounded knobs and dragged it over the floor to the door. Siwara rose, the knife in her hand. "Should we break it—now?" she asked.

He stopped, looked up. "Not just yet. Orcher will come only once, remember. Yanuk's a little better—he's going to try his magic if he can. If he can't—then we'll break it."

She sighed. "You know best."

Gene dragged the jewel, panting and cursing, to Yanuk's door. He tumbled it in. Yanuk was sitting up on the bed.

"Look!" he cried. "Blue fire!" On his shaking fingertips the blue glow was gathering. But it was pale, very pale—only the ghost of what had come from his hand in the temple.

"Good!" Gene's face lightened; he clapped his hand so heartily on Yanuk's back that the sorcerer winced, dropping the blue-misted hand to his paunch.

"Oh!" He cried it involuntarily. "Please! I'm not *that* well!"

"I brought the jewel. It's up to you to guard it. I'm sorry, Yanuk, to put so much responsibility on you—but we're in sore need. I hope we'll be able to repay you—" His voice cracked; his eyes were pained.

Yanuk gestured deprecatingly. "I'm glad if I can help. *If* I can help," he reiterated uncertainly.

"You'd better send Siwara in here to me. If I can't do anything else, at least I can try to protect her."

Gene strode to the door, leaned a hand on its frame as he put his head into the hallway. "Siwara! Come to Yanuk! Bring Marza!" He was jerking spears from their clasps on the wall when Siwara entered with her maid. She eyed him with foreboding.

"Gene! You can't go out to fight like that! Go to Froar's room. He has a coat of chain links. It's in one of the chests."

He went into Froar's quarters. The men snapped up to attention from poses of ease. He jerked his thumb at the door. "Go out on deck. We'll need you in the fight. I'll take care of Froar."

The men went out quickly enough, but he was not satisfied with the backward glance that they turned on the man in red. Had Froar been talking to them, coaxing them to his side? Well, there

was no time to find out now. He went to the chair where Froar was sitting. The man in red lifted shaggy brows in ironic question as he came. Gene grasped Froar's robe at the chest, hauled him up to his feet.

"I don't like hitting a defenseless man, Froar—but I haven't an opportunity for anything else." He read the sneer in the tall man's eyes. "And yet—I don't mind hitting you—like this!" His first smacked Froar's chin; the man staggered back. The blow had been a strong one, but it did not stun him. Gene stepped after him; his fist cracked again. Froar went down heavily, lay huddled.

Gene pried into a chest, tossed out articles of clothing, supplemented Froar's fetters with knotted cloth and a gag. Then he tore through the clothing in the chest, hurling it out in his haste, strewing the floor. There was no coat of mail in that chest. He went to another. Lying atop its neatly folded garments was the protective doublet and a helmet, a sword. He snatched them out, wriggled into the mail. The helmet was too small. He hefted the sword. It was good to have its crescent blade in his hand, even though he was not quite sure how to use it.

Going out, he looked back at Froar. The man was unconscious. He went back to Yanuk's cabin; the sorcerer was sick again, Siwara and her maid attending him. Silently the princess left the bed to hand Gene a bow, and help him slip the quiver-belt over a shoulder. He looked at her for a long second, and hurried out.

He was not used to the weight of mail; he was tired enough already, and its heaviness dragged on him. He straightened his spine, drew his shoulders back as he emerged from the cabinway. The men were swarming over the deck; they had fitted shields along the railing to protect the relief shift of rowers; now they were setting up flat wooden pieces with slits in them for the shooting out of arrows.

The ships from Koph were closer now. *Cling! Clang! Cling!* The hortator's triangle sounded stridently.

Gene took his place behind one of the arrow-flats. The men turned to him; he was evidently expected to lead them. Behind the flats were pots of oil, bundles of cottony waste. Spiked torches had been stuck into the planking; their oily black smoke was acrid in the still air. The men had been wrapping the cottony fibers around the points of their arrows, dipping them into the oil and laying them aside to prepare others. Gene treated some of his arrows, too, glancing up frequently toward the nearing warships.

The sun was rising, golden on the horizon. Two of Koph's ships were speeding out ahead of the others, their three banks of oars twinkling in the light of daybreak. They slipped over the water toward Siwara's vessel as though it were not moving at all.

There was no use in further rowing; the enemy ships meant to pass on each side of Siwara's galley, snapping the oars, probably killing a good many of the rowers. The men would serve better fighting. If the ship turned, it would be rammed and sunk.

There was Orcher's jewel. If it were broken now, and Orcher came, he could destroy the fleet of Koph. But that would not put an end to the menace of Koph, which could send another fleet. No, the jewel must not be let fall—not just yet, anyway.

Gene yelled down, "Stop rowing! Arm yourselves and fight!" The oarsmen dragged in their sweeps as the coxswain's triangle stopped clanging. They poured down into their quarters.

A small, delicate man had appeared at Gene's side—he was only a lad, dragging about awkwardly, twisting cotton on his arrows, soaking them in oil. He bumped into Gene, who turned upon him angrily.

"Watch what you're doing, will you? Why—Siwara!"

The princess straightened, pathetically frail in her oversized coat of mail. Kaspel's helmet was on her head, and his sword clanked against her side.

"Siwara, get back in with Yanuk! Quick—before it's too late!"

The ships of Koph were driving down upon the galley, their knife-blade prows gleaming. Their decks were crammed with men, sunlight sparkling on armor. Shouts arose from them. Someone shrilled commands.

Siwara raised her chin proudly.

"What kind of a woman do you think I am? The women of Nanich are free to fight beside their men! And I am a woman of Nanich!"

The Koph ships were sliding alongside now. She stared at them, at the men bustling on them. "I know what this means if Yanuk and Orcher fail us. We won't come out of it alive. And when I die, I die beside you, Gene." She gazed levelly at him.

There was no time to remonstrate with her. An arrow whistled across the water, thudding into the wooden flat.

XIII.

Arrows were flying on both sides, now. The hostile vessels had drawn in their oars; their sides grated against Siwara's galley as they overtook it. Gene held an oil-dripping arrow over a torch, lifted it flaming, shot it through the slit in the flat as other arrows sang toward the ship. Hurtling darts cracked against the flats from the other side, passing over them, striking the men protecting the opposite side of the ship. Several men

fell, flaming arrows cutting through their armor, their throats.

Busy as he was, Gene noted that grapples on chains rattled down, gripping the galley's rails, that the men on the lower deck were fighting to unhook them, falling under the whistling javelins, the screaming arrows. There were catapults down by the masts; steel-pointed missiles stabbed into the Koph ship's sides. A bolt hurtled from the throwing engine by the tiller before its men dropped down in a stream of arrows. Others leaped to take their places.

Both sides were screaming battle cries, imprecations in rage and anguish—and sometimes terror. "For Koph! For Koph! Erlikh and Dann!"

"For Siwara! For Nanich!"

Without knowing it, as Gene sped his arrows, he was howling, "Damn you! Damn you!"

His bowstring snapped. He let the bow fall, hurled his spears. From the enemy ship's decks men began to clamber down—and fall between the grinding vessels, pierced by the arrows.

A sail of the ship before him went up in flames—great tongues of fire that roared lustily, licking up, igniting the higher sail, throwing out waves of heat, sickly yellowish smoke. The Koph warriors had succeeded in landing on the galley. It was a clashing of swords now—one of Gene's arms thrusting Siwara back against the shelter of the wooden flat as his blade sang back and forth. He cut through the neck of the man before him, gaped astonished as the fellow went sprawling. Then another was at him. Their swords clanged; a numbing shock jarred his arm. He lunged. The tip of his sword snapped against the other's mail, but the thrust bent the fellow double. Gene struck before he could rise; the man smacked on the floor as though he had fallen from a great height.

He did not know—he who had never needed to fight before—that his lips were drawn back from his teeth in fury and exertion. Siwara's men were dropping under the unequal assault. Three of the Koph men had pressed in front of him now, and Siwara's scimitar was singing beside him. Without thinking, he drew his dagger, swiped with his sword. It broke on the steel of another. A man lunged; he grappled with him, turning him like a shield to fend another's stroke. It bit into his assailant, cutting the mail, nearly halving the man. He met the rush of a warrior with his blade lifting; its point cut under the man's chin.

He slipped on blood, luckily. A sword whirred over his head. He sprang from his crouch, toppled the man, dragging away the sword from the man's hand, cutting his palm—but he did not know it.

The air was a bedlam of sounds—the ring of metal striking metal, the heavy thud of blades biting bodies, the shouts and war cries. Siwara had felled a man, was engaged with another. He whipped his sword against the man's legs; felled him. Siwara turned to aid one of her men; a stroke caught Gene across the back; he went down with a grunt.

The man straddled him, raising his sword. Gene's knife flashed up; the man dropped the sword behind his back, screamed, clutching his wound. Gene pushed the toppling body aside, scrabbling to his feet. His saber struck the thrust of another, spinning the steel from the man's hands. He drove the blade on an upstroke; it scratched on mail, streaked up the man's face.

A lance skimmed his hair, splitting the wooden flat beyond him. A man jumped him; they tumbled down, rolled over and over. Where was his blade? He had dropped it in the fall. The other's poniard swept toward his throat; he caught the hand, deflecting it. A thrust from a man above, not intended for him, neatly clipped a lock of his hair.

His fingers slipping, he jerked the man's arm, his other hand on the man's face. It, too, slipped—it was bleeding—pushed off the fellow's helmet. His fingers twisted in the hair while the other hand caught the arm with the knife. He dragged up the head, banged it on the deck again and again, unaware that he was doing it—the arm with the knife fell heavily. He snatched the dagger, crouched, men pressing all around him in combat with each other. He thrust up the knife—

And now he was with Siwara again, beating away the others, a slash down his cheek sending warm blood running under his mail. Siwara had no sword; he wrested one from a fallen man, handed it to her as his own flailed.

What was Yanuk doing? It was strange, this warfare—he was fighting automatically, his thoughts reeling around in drunken disorder. He could see Yanuk down below in the cabin—a sick Yanuk, hurling globes of blue light into the faces of those at his stateroom's door. A good heap of bodies lay in the doorway—ah, but that was no way to fight! The men would recover to make the attempt again, as Froar had recovered from Yanuk's spell. The fishman should kill, kill, kill—

Someone's lunge knocked off Siwara's helmet; her coiled braids slipped down her cheeks as she fell. He stood over her, howling insanely, his blade biting, biting, biting. One of Siwara's men pushed to his side, fended the cuts. What was wrong with him! He knew that the sun was lifting higher into the sky—and yet things were growing dark! And there was a ringing in his ears. Well—perhaps it was smoke. And he was tired—yes, he was very tired. But that didn't matter. It wasn't he who was fighting. Someone was inside his body, fighting for him.

The jewel! Yanuk's magic wasn't doing much good. Perhaps the fish creature was too sick to do anything much. What good were clay figures now—clay figures and little balls of blue light!

Break the jewel, Yanuk, break that jewel! Get Orcher here! Siwara's fallen, maybe dead—and this ringing in my ears! Why's everything so dark? What's the matter? Is the ship sinking? The deck's tilting—we're turning over!

Yanuk—break that jewel!

He fell—but he did not know it. His hand fumbled out, touched Siwara's braids—but he did not know that, either. Then he lay very still. More and more warriors were dropping to Siwara's galley. One ship was burning, the other sinking from a hole torn in it by the catapult's missiles—there were only a few of Siwara's men alive; mounds of those who had died loyally were around her.

He was oblivious to it all, his thoughts wandering in a dark realm amid screaming music. Music! Orcher! Had he come? Had Yanuk broken the great sapphire at last? Well, it did not matter now—Siwara was dead. He was probably dying. At least he hoped so. There was no use going on now. Siwara was dead—he couldn't get back to his own world and he wouldn't go if he could. Nanich was as good as fallen. If Orcher had come, Nanich was saved. But it would make no difference now to Siwara—to himself.

But Orcher had not come. The jewel was not broken. His head was pillowed on something hard and rough; a soft hand was stroking his hair. Someone was weeping. His thoughts scrambled out of the darkness. Where was his sword? He threw out his hands, searching for it, drew up his legs to spring up and fight—

He blinked at the sunlight. He was lying on the lower deck, his head on Siwara's lap, her braids swinging as she leaned over him sobbing, her fingers touching his hair. Armed men surrounded them, swords ready.

The left side of his face was on fire—that was where someone's steel had cut it. He grinned up at the surprised eyes of Siwara, and her sobs choked into weak laughter.

He lifted his head. The burning ship and sinking ship were gone. Siwara's galley was in the midst of Koph's fleet. Why hadn't she killed herself? He had thought that she was dead. And now she was a captive of Koph—and he wasn't sure that Koph treated its prisoners kindly. What would become of her? How would she finish the rest of her life? He groaned, agonized by the thoughts, and Siwara put a hand to her cheek, worried.

"Where's Yanuk?" He tried to sit up, but could not.

She bent her head aside. Yanuk was in the grasp of two armored men, ghastly in his sickness.

"The jewel?"

She looked straight ahead. His eyes struggled to see. Four men held a sagging bundle of cloth, each grasping a corner, and from the rounded points pressing through the cloth he knew that there was the jewel.

Froar was standing by them, no longer in manacles, smiling pleasantly, not a scratch on him, his red robes fresh and resplendent. And not far were two others in gold-plated mail—the gold was scratched and worn off in spots, but it was gold for all of that. They must be powers, those men.

Gene endeavored to pull himself up again, felt a stinging pain in his right arm, gritted his teeth and managed to pull himself up. There was a bandage on his arm. He felt his cheek. It was a nasty cut, but blood was congealing in it.

Siwara leaned feebly against him, her laughter still trickling. "Gene! You're alive! But you were lying there, so white! So white!"

He put his good arm around her. The men guarding him did not move. The princess arose. "Can you stand?" He nodded and she tugged on him, hardly able to draw him erect.

The singing was in his ears again, but soft and far away. He swayed, his gaze running from face to face. It was unreal, all of it. It couldn't be happening! But it *was* real. And somehow funny. His mouth opened to loose a laugh—and then it wasn't so funny. No, not when you had your arm around Siwara—and didn't know what was going to happen to her. Not funny at all.

He turned his head to the princess. "Siwara—what's going to happen to you? Will I ever see you again?"

Her eyes were cold, as though she had never seen him before. "I don't know. But you mustn't worry. We're still alive. And there's the jewel, and Yanuk. There may be hope yet." She whispered it. Her eyes softened. "You were glorious—I'll never forget you!"

Small consolation! Then the guard around them parted. The two men in the golden mail came up to them.

"The tall one's Dann," Siwara murmured. "The other's his brother Erlikh. I've seen them before—they came to Nanich months ago, insolent in their demands. Now if Carill were here—the might of Koph would be before us."

The tall man was blond and pudgy, his face stupid and amiable. The smaller man was dark and slender, his face sharp, like a rodent's, his eyes calculating and deceitful. The two of them stood eying the princess, then turned their gaze to Gene. Froar sidled up to them, whispered. A certain evil understanding smirched the face of Erlikh, the little man. But Dann, the blond fellow, smiled

tolerantly, as though whatever Froar had said were nothing unfavorable.

Froar pointed at Yanuk, who was heedless of everything. "*He* says he's immortal. It would be interesting to test his immortality—perhaps with little sharp instruments cutting here and there you might unriddle the secret of his everlasting life. But I don't think so. No matter. You'd best kill him. He's had a strong dose of Vyras poison—and it doesn't seem to have affected him much. He's a sorcerer. He can make little demons out of clay—they move, are alive!"

Dann stared at him in contempt and disbelief. Erlikh's ratty eyes were doubtful, too—but cunning.

"And that"—Froar pointed to the jewel—"that's something to give them power. I'm not quite sure what's to be done with it, but I'd advise you to throw it into the sea where it can do no harm."

Burly Dann turned to stare at the jewel. Little Erlikh skulked over to the cradling cloth, peered covetously into it.

"What a jewel!" His voice was a tinny tenor. "And the size of it!" His eyes gloated. "We'll not throw that thing overboard, Froar. It's priceless—it can mean much in Koph." He smirked at the princess. "Yes, and in Nanich, too, very soon. After we've made it one of our colonies."

Froar scanned the princess. "What do you intend doing with her?"

Dann's fingers rubbed his stubbly chin. "We'll put her in her cabin temporarily with a guard, until Carill comes—then we'll take counsel and decide."

"Don't let the man go with her," Froar said, his eyes sly.

It irked Erlikh. He turned on Froar—more than a head smaller than the man in red, yet with the potentialities of a giant. "You're not directing us, Froar—not yet. The man can't do any harm. He goes with her. And that—thing—that you call a sorcerer."

He laughed shortly, shrilly. "A sorcerer! You superstitious fool!"

"Well—at least keep the jewel from them." But Erlikh's eyes said that there was no need to fear on that score.

Froar pointed to Yanuk. "As long as *he's* alive—I'm not staying on this ship! Laugh at me if you like"—he scowled at Erlikh—"but I've seen the little clay horrors. I'll have no more of them."

Dann scrutinized him disparagingly. "Go wherever you like." He caught Froar's contagious urbanity. "The ships of Koph are all yours, Froar." And his eyes added an-afterthought, too. They said: "Nothing of the kind."

Froar's scowl deepened; the planes on his face were very sharp. "You will give me an escort? I'll go fetch Carill."

Erlikh considered the faces of his warriors. He pointed. "You go, and you. Two's enough."

Froar did not like that, either, but he said nothing. He turned, beckoning the men to follow him, strode angrily to one of the ship's boats.

Dan murmured to his brother. Erlikh did not sanction what he heard, but he agreed, fear subtly narrowing his eyes. But the sweep of his arm in command was imperious. "Take this princess and her man within—and the sorcerer." He laughed over the word. "Let them console each other until Carill comes." It was an unnecessary supplement, that reference to Carill. But it was apparent that Erlikh thought the remark highly appropriate.

Gene's flesh crawled as the men grasped his arm, marshaled him and Siwara into the passageway, into the girl's cabin. They pushed the two down on the cushions under the large window and ranged themselves about the room, standing in rigid attention. They were soldiers of Koph. Discipline was vital. The two supporting Yanuk walked him in, dropped him beside Gene and the princess. Another brought in the disheveled Marza, her clothing ripped—it was she who had bandaged Gene's arm—her little idol gripped to her bosom. She jerked from the man's hold, rushed across the room to Siwara, sank weeping before her, her face on her knees. Siwara patted her head an instant, then gave the hand to Gene. He gripped it—they looked into each other's eyes. They had no use for words just then.

And so they sat, and time dragged away like a weary blind hag on an endless journey. The sun lowered; the sky's red glow seeped in through the pane. The ship was moving—towed behind another vessel, Siwara finally announced.

Yanuk was torn by recoveries and relapses. The men eyed his attempts to summon his blue fires skeptically.

They brought food for the captives—who had little taste for food. Only Marza really managed to eat; she stuffed great fistfuls into her mouth, all the while bitterly weeping. Gorged, she cowered back against the wall, one of the princess' hands pressed to a cheek, wet with tears. Her head jerked; she let the hand sink gradually lower to the cushions. She slept—and snored.

The cabin was bright with lamplight when Froar entered. Gene's hand was still in Siwara's—the two of them were staring ahead as though in a dream. Once Siwara turned her face to Gene, and though the sentinels did not move, their eyes flickered. If she had changed her pose, tried to stand, they would have raced to her.

There was something covert, hurried, in Froar's poise. He motioned the guards to the corners of the room as he entered. The men stirred, irresolute, but at a gesture from the other man, they

withdrew against the far walls, out of hearing—if words were whispered.

The stranger with Froar wore golden mail, too. He was squat and swarthy, his face somehow similar to that of the man in red, but more crude. He was like a carving in hard dark wood—carving executed with a hatchet.

"Carill," Siwara murmured tonelessly—perhaps calling the man by name, perhaps identifying him to Gene.

No one noticed, but at the edge of Yanuk's hands the blue fire was beginning to glow. He might not have been as ill as he seemed. At a flirt of Froar's hand toward the fish being, dark Carill stepped forward, halted above him. And, meanwhile, one of the guards was edging to the door. Froar could have seen him—but Froar was intent on what Carill was saying to Yanuk. The man slipped out of the room, tiptoed swiftly down the hall.

Carill stooped to Yanuk, bringing his face to Yanuk's level. He muttered—in a voice that creaked like metal scraping metal—"I've heard that you're a magician, that you can operate the blue jewel of power. If I can get it—you could be of service to me. And it might save you your life." Froar openly sneered at that. But Carill went on, disregarding him, "I am Carill, one of the three at the head of Koph. I'll get the jewel. Use it to slay Dann and Erlikh—raising me to dictatorship over all Koph—Koph and its colonies!"

Froar was glancing uneasily over his shoulder. He laid a palm on Carill's shoulder. "Be quick!"

Carill nodded to him, turned back to Yanuk. "Well—will you help me if I see to it that they let you live?"

Gene grinned at Siwara. "It's Froar," he said, as though the man had just come in. "And he's clinging to his usual policy again—treachery!"

Froar's eyes blazed; the back of his hand struck Gene on his slashed cheek, cracking the stiffening blood, starting a stream of red down the jaw. But Gene merely stared into Froar's eyes and laughed without feeling. And Froar's eyes squinted, puzzled. Siwara spat at him! He lifted a hand to strike her, too—and Yanuk raised a paw.

The misted azure was bright on Yanuk's fingers. It gathered like drops of quicksilver running together and floated slowly, a wabbling sphere, across the few inches of space into Carill's face. It soaked into the skin. Carill did not move. Yanuk's hand swerved toward Froar, and the man in red cursed, sprang up, wheeling to run—and at the same time more men and Dann and his brother hurried over the threshold, swords ready.

Froar cringed from them. He stepped back and farther back, his foot slipping on the cushions where Marza was still snoring; he pressed against the wall. The brothers and their men did not speak. Their swords were held straight ahead—and all of them aimed at Froar—as they inched forward.

There were no planes in Froar's face now, only distorted seams like scars. He lifted and lowered his feet as though he were still walking, miraculously passing through the wall, his calves nudging Siwara, who drew away serenely as though unconscious of all that was occurring, a faint displeasure in her eyes as she glanced up at Froar. Marza's snores stopped; she lifted her head, crawled out of the way. The men were close now—very close. The lamplight ran starrily over their steel. A cry writhed in Froar's throat; he was panting. His fingers touched the glass. He crouched, tensing himself to leap—and the blades pressed into him. Someone reached out, dragged Gene and Siwara away as Froar fell, and blood jetted from his wounds. He dropped like a damp cloth and did not twitch. Dann and Erlikh drew back; their men kicked Froar's body, rolling it aside.

Carill had remained squatting in front of Yanuk, impassive. The advancing men had bumped him and he had tumbled over on his side. Now Erlikh and Dann looked down on him.

Erlikh clucked his tongue in unconvincing sympathy. "Poor Carill! He's dead!" He raised his eyes aloft in blasphemous piety. "And we did not kill him, Dann and I—you men can testify as to that." He turned to them, then put a hand on his brother's back. "Well, Dann—that leaves just you and I—and the power of Koph's army." His eyes searched his brother's stolid face as though he were worried about what might lie behind it.

Carill was not dead, of course—merely enthralled, as Froar had been in Orcher's temple. But evidently Erlikh did not know of that.

"We'll take his body and bury it at sea with all the honors," he said. "It's obvious that we didn't kill him. There's no mark on him." His eyes fixed on Yanuk. "Did you do that? I wonder how! You'd better not try it on me!" But Yanuk seemed to be ill again.

Erlikh thrust a forefinger toward the senseless Carill. "Carry him out. Be gentle with him—we must respect the dead!" Dann's amiability was disappearing; he was eying his brother with a hint of wonder. Erlikh jerked his arm. "Come along, brother. You who were here before, stay here. You'll be relieved shortly—and there'll be rewards for all of you." The men's eyes glinted eagerly.

Carill's spellbound form was borne out, Dann and Erlikh followed. At the door, Erlikh turned. It was impossible for him not to be dramatic.

"Princess, you seem to be wrapped in a vision. But perhaps I can bring you back to our midst. We're nearing Nanich. We'll reach it some time during the morning. You know what that means."

Siwara awoke. She turned passionately to-

Gene, her eyes crying out to him.

Erlikh's smile was a mental licking of his chops. There was something of Froar in him. He straightened, almost swaggered as he followed his brother down the hall.

The guards were like human dolls, life discernible only in their breathing, their vigilant eyes.

And the stars beamed in through the window with twinklings like laughter translated into light.

XIV.

Yanuk revived almost instantly, smiling at Gene and the princess. Marza, the maid, was ripping off a bloodstain on the edge of her dress, after which she relapsed into prayers for her idol. Gene was furious, interrupting something that Siwara was about to say.

"If you'd been half so able while the fight was going on, Yanuk, you'd have broken the sapphire and brought Orcher!"

Yanuk's eyes were grieved. "I was sick then, Gene—truly sick. Don't you believe me?" He thrust out a pleading paw—no blue fire remaining on it.

"You recovered in a hurry!" Gene snapped.

"After the men cornered me they shook me about so that I think I fainted," Yanuk explained naïvely. "I think that must have shaken the rest of the poison out of me."

Gene snorted derision. The princess leaned over to touch both of them.

"Let's not quarrel," she said, and glanced around at the guards. She lowered her voice. "Yanuk—have you the strength to perform a magic that can take us out of this?"

He nodded. "But what good will it do? We're surrounded by Koph's ships. We can't get to Nanich any faster. Why not travel as far as we can?"

"We could get the jewel, break it, and call Orcher to us." She smiled sadly. "If, of course—he'll come. And why should he?"

Yanuk was as unsure. "If he'll come—you're right in putting it like that, princess. He's been tardy before. I remember one time, when my people were still alive . . oh, it must have been ages ago. . . . they called him, but he didn't appear. And another time I started The Machine—but he stayed away. He has so much more important work to do—at least, it's important to him. We're only troublesome little insects to him. And that is why, princess, that I think we ought to do nothing at all until this ship reaches Nanich. Unless somebody tries to harm us."

Siwara reflected. "You may be right. But I'm so impatient. My people! There's still hope of saving them!" Her great eyes caressed Gene.

"Siwara, I'm sleepy," he said, as though announcing the impossible.

She was practical. "Well, then, sleep. Settle back against the wall. You can rest against me." Like a child, he obeyed. She patted his head maternally. "You ought to take off that heavy mail—but you might need it later." She frowned at the guards. "I wish these men would stop staring!" She suppressed a yawn. "I'm tired, too. But it doesn't seem right to sleep at a time like this. Still, there's nothing to do—and you've raised my hopes, Yanuk." Her smile was a kiss to him. He brightened pleasurably. "I think that I'll try to sleep, too—if I can." Her eyelids were already half closed. She bumped back against the wall, stirred in weak protest at the jar.

Gene was dozing. Soon the girl was slumbering. Yanuk looked about the room—at the glare of the lamps, the men, Marza mumbling to her statuette. He shook his head at all of them, humped over on his side, exhaled a great breath.

Then he, too, was asleep.

The trampling of feet, outcries, roused them. Gene was stiff, and his arm pained him. He was not a very good thing to look upon, with his face caked with dried blood. Gray morning light sifting through the curtains did not prettify him.

Siwara jerked her shoulders, flexed her arms, fingered her braids. She was concerned about Gene's injuries. "I'm afraid there'll be infection," she murmured.

Yanuk raised a calming hand. "I can stop that." He lightly placed a paw on one of Gene's cuts, his eyes goggling comically as he concentrated. "I'm projecting white light into the wounds," he whispered to Siwara. "It's antiseptic." He touched each of Gene's hurts, asking, "Do you feel anything?" Gene shook his head. "Well, it's helping you all the same."

Marza had evidently discarded her faith in her idol, for it lay unheeded beside her. She peered toward the door, wondering at the sounds.

"Nanich must be in sight," Siwara said. She called to the guards. "Are we nearing Nanich?"

One man considered the propriety of an answer. He nodded shortly and became an automaton again.

Siwara brooded at Yanuk. "It's time for you to work your magic," she said. "I wish that we were on deck so that I could see what they're doing."

And this was apparently intended to be, since men trooped down the hallway and into the chamber, advancing to the prisoners. They motioned for the princess and the others to stand.

"Where are you taking us?" Gene asked, an arm about the girl.

"Erlikh said to bring you on deck. He wants

you to watch the downfall of Nanich," one man said. Aside, to another, he murmured, "*You* know how he is!" It was a shock, this first hint of insubordination.

The captives were led through the passage, led to the galley's upper deck. Siwara grimaced at the dried blood there. Four chairs had been placed near the tiller—more of Erlikh's dramatics. They sat down, the men behind them.

Haze obscured the sun. The galley was still in the center of the fleet, a towline running to a preceding vessel. And Nanich was very close. They were just outside its harbor.

It lay before them, a long green line studded with brown masses that Siwara said were cliffs. White upon it was the city. Siwara sighed, her finger pointing. "There's my city—Jolaise. To the left, just behind that precipice there, lies

Shangar. Then there are villages, and far there —where it starts to get misty—that's Alu." She turned to Orcher's pupil. "Yanuk?"

"Yes?" He dragged his eyes from the vista.

The guards were listening. She could not say much. "Remember what we talked about last night?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

He did not answer. He returned his gaze to the shore of Nanich, peering intently as though striving to magnify its details.

One of the guards nudged another. "Look down there." His hand waved. The other man looked. So did Gene and the princess.

Marza started out of her chair, a hand dismayed at her mouth. "Fire! It's fire!" She felt in her gown for her discarded idol.

It was only a little tendril of fire wedging up through the flooring on the deck below. But smoke began to curl upward; the flame sprouted, grew, blossomed with lesser flames. Other tendrils appeared, and a dry, brittle snapping. Some of the guards hurried off the deck, down the stair; the others wavered near the prisoners.

Unconsciously, Siwara clutched Gene's bandaged arm; he flinched, turning his eyes from the fascination of the growing flames. The princess bent to peer across him at Yanuk, who sat unperturbed, his eyes on Nanich.

The flames spread; the smoke was spurting up in thickening columns. From the cabins below a great tongue of it lapped. Was it really fire? There was a sensation of heat—perhaps to the Koph soldiers it seemed unendurable, but it did not blister the paint on the decorated cabin walls.

Shouts arose: "Fire! Fire!" The few who were aboard scrambled out on the deck, milled about uncertainly. It was plainly useless to try to quench those avid flames; they were pouring up fiercely from all over the vessel, and the smoke was stinging the Koph men's eyes. Not the eyes of the four in the chairs on the upper deck, however, who sat through it all without evincing anything more than pleased interest.

The last of the guards rushed off the deck. Those below were flinging themselves over the rail, into the sea, striking toward the other ships. From the other vessels, where warriors were clustering at the sides, shouts echoed.

There was no hope for the vessel. It was doomed and would have to be turned loose lest its fire spread to the other ships. Some of the men on the lower deck remembered the captives and started up to get them, but bursts of fire fountained in their path, turning them back. The smoke swirled across their faces; they dashed hands against their eyes, blinded.

It may have been that they felt no heat, no bite of the smoke at all, that they expected it to the point of believing in it. The barricade of flame made it impossible to identify the men moiling around below—and soon there were no men; they had leaped into the sea, abandoning the little lifeboats that they were hurrying to lower to the water, leaving one dangling, one end on a rope, the other resting on the sea.

When the last of them had gone, the flames rolled away from uncharred wood and gathered along the sides of the ship in a spectacular swaying curtain whose folds were edged with coiling smoke. The decks were clear.

Yanuk, his eyes still glazed in the direction of Nanich's coast, reached to Gene, murmuring, "Help me down on deck. Get a boat over the side—look for the jewel."

As they helped him down the steep little stair he peered ahead raptly. He waited for them by one of the masts, a fantastic scaled statue with a bulging hemisphere of a stomach.

Gene and the princess forgot their stiffness and soreness as they bustled from stateroom to stateroom, prying into chests, ripping covers off the beds, searching for Orcher's jewel. In Froar's cabin they came upon the dishes and food of a meal that had been laid out; the men must have been just sitting down to it. In Yanuk's cabin were stacked arms. But no jewel. No jewel anywhere on the ship.

Siwara clung weakly to a wall, her face blank. Gene drew her to him. "Don't give up, Siwara. Nanich hasn't fallen. What if we have no jewel? We have Yanuk. And at the worst it's only as if we'd never seen the island at all, merely managed to weather the storm, outrun the spy ship—we can get back to Nanich."

And then she was the Siwara of the start of the voyage again, desirable and considerate. She lifted her lips to be kissed. They stood together an instant until Marza emerged from the cabin of the princess, her little idol in one hand; she eyed it as though not sure whether to discard it again or tuck it away in her robe.

They went out to Yanuk. Gene shook him. "Yanuk—we can't find the jewel. Maybe it's on one of the other ships. What do we do now?"

Yanuk's wide mouth chewed words. "Get a boat over the side—we'll row to Nanich."

Gene went to the hedge of flame that still gushed up around the ship. There was no heat. He experimentally thrust a hand into the orange jets, felt nothing, and poked his head over the side, peeped down.

"There's a boat on the water already," he called. "Siwara, come along. And you, Marza. Wait!"

He ran back to the cabins and emerged with arms—swords and daggers for the four of them. He distributed them, Marza accepting hers fearfully, as though taking a white-hot coin, Yanuk's

fingers closing over the hilts of the weapons with never a flicker in his eyes.

Gene dragged on the davit rope with his good arm until the boat below bobbed on the waves. "Siwara, do you think you can slide down the rope? Or should we tie it around you, lower you to the boat?"

She said. "I'll slide down. But you'll have to lower Marza—I don't think there's a spot of intelligence left in her."

Yanuk came to them, walking stiffly, his eyes still rapt. Siwara grasped Gene, slipping her legs over the rail, one hand on the rope. With both she gripped it, tested it. She wriggled over the side, slipped down the rope into the bobbing boat, disregarding the rope burns on her hands. Yanuk went next. Then Gene's knife slashed the other davit rope—the one that already hung slack on the bow of the craft below. He knotted it about Marza, lifted her—she resisted him faintly, not certain as to what was happening to her—and payed out the rope as slowly as possible, crouching, one foot braced against the ship's side; he was grinning with pain and effort. The rope loosened; Marza was in the boat. He slid down the other davit rope, tormented by the cut arm, thudded into the craft. Siwara cut the davit rope; the boat drifted free from her galley. She lifted an oar, wrapped Marza's fingers about its haft.

"You'll have to row with me, Marza." She took another oar for herself. "Gene can't, with his injured arm. Marza!" Her voice rose sharply. "Did you hear me? Row!"

Mechanically, Marza slipped the oar into a lock, tugged on it, Siwara timing her strokes to the maid's, heading for Nanich.

Fire poured like liquid down the galley's side, leaped to the boat, walled it. Gene sat at the bow, a hand on his bandaged arm, which was bleeding, his eyes prying through the flame. Yanuk sat at the stern, meshed in concentration.

The Koph fleet's sails were down. From the harbor of Nanich the little sea army of Siwara was riding. Soon the two would clash. The odds were hopelessly in favor of Koph.

Gene nodded in admiring approval. Hopeless or not—the men of Nanich were determined to protect their country!

They glided through a lane of Koph ships. Little attention was directed on them—it was only a burning lifeboat from Siwara's galley. It did not matter—so long as it didn't set fire to one of the warships. Koph's warriors were busy preparing for the battle.

The burning boat drifted on and on—always toward Nanich's harbor of Jolaise. Siwara was tired, but she would not surrender her oar to Gene. Marza would, though—she allowed him to take it from her, edged aside so that he could fill her place. Fear had made her an idiot. But after several drags upon the sculls, Gene could not continue. Marza returned to rowing as readily as she had ceased.

At last they had left the ranks of Koph ships. The war vessels of Nanich were closer. The burning boat went aside to avoid them.

Then the flame snapped out. Yanuk sighed heavily, took deep breaths, slapping his chest proudly. "Well—I did it. I feel as though my head's about to fly off my shoulders. Siwara, I'll row now."

The princess went to Gene, put her arms about him. The boat continued its crawl toward Nanich's harbor. They peered back.

Siwara's galley was no longer in flames. They could not see it; Koph's ships screened it, but no smoke was rising; there was no glint of flame. The two fleets were close now. Siwara's ships were impressive—what there were of them. If only there were more!

The harbor was not far now, its wharves serried with watching people.

The battle had begun out on the water. There were faint papery cracklings of ships ramming. A red spark of flame crawled over one of Koph's ships—

XV.

It was a bedraggled, exhausted princess who was pulled up to the docks of Nanich. She tottered in her ripped coat of mail, an arm around Gene, who was none too steady himself. The crowd walled them—soldiers, all of them—their voices drummed indistinguishably on tired ears. Marza was brought up; she eyed Nanich's warriors without comprehension. And then Yanuk. The crowd pressed close to him, gaping, goggling; he goggled back, interested though weary.

A tall man bellowed orders. He lifted Siwara, carried her like a child through the throng. A pair of men steadied Gene, following. Marza went next, a walking doll—but not a very pretty one. Then Yanuk. His fatigue was mental rather than physical; he needed no assistance.

They passed through barricades to a water-front street. Jolaise was a white city, its stone structures small, pebbled with cramped sculptures.

A cartload of soldiers was coming down the broad street. It was drawn by what might—or might not—have been horses; they looked a good deal like deer. Siwara's bearer stepped into the street, halting the vehicle, shouting for the men to get out, that here was their princess.

Safe in the cart, Gene, Yanuk and Marza beside her, Siwara asked, "Mordin—are you taking me to my palace?"

He nodded.

She shook her head. "No. I want to go to Kaspel's house; it's high and nearer the water. We can watch from its roof. You've put a man in

your place? Good. I want you to come along with us—I have a plan to execute when Koph's men try to set foot in this city. Where's Byely stationed? And Gorm, Raigal?"

The soldier signaled to the driver. The cart rattled over the brick road. "Dead, princess. Gorm and Byely were poisoned. Raigal was found floating in the river."

"Froar's agents," she said aloud to herself. "Mordin, what are you doing about defending the other cities—the coastline?" Gene was leaning on the side of the cart, listening. Marza was playing with her idol as though it were a doll and she a little girl pretending to be its mother. Yanuk was eavesdropping happily.

Mordin sighed. "Messengers have gone to the cities and villages, calling for reinforcements here, leaving skeleton garrisons. There are sizable armies in Alu and Shangar. Some ships are patrolling the coast as far as the Black Mountain."

She bent her head approvingly. "That's about all you can do."

From the roof of Kaspel's dwelling they looked over rows of buildings to the sea. The battle was still being fought. The ships were dark little insects clustered around a speck of food. Fire and smoke dotted them, blended with them, confusing their outlines.

Marza was somewhere below, being cared for. Gene's wounds had been dressed, stitches taken in his cheek. The princess was pretty, though pallid, in a robe brought from her palace. The coats of mail lay handily on a divan.

Yanuk deserted his place beside one of the carved, bedizened shafts that supported the roof's awning, in answer to Siwara's summons. She was leaning over a table, ink beside her, a brush in her hand. Gene and Mordin and other of her chiefs were eying the paper.

"This," the girl told Yanuk, "is a map. A map of Jolaise. As you see, the river cuts it in half. We're here, on the right side. Across the river are mostly factories. These are the bridges."

Her brush scrabbled over the crisp paper. "On the factory side, Jolaise is walled. Here, and around from the sea to the river, are sharp upthrusts of volcanic rock—Koph's men can't cross them except at one place, and that's guarded.

"So they'll try to land from the sea. We'll burn the piers. The warehouses are flush to the water; they can't land along the water front. So they'll try to come up the river. And there's where you come in, Yanuk, with your magic flame.

"The river's not too wide, as you can see, looking from this roof. Can you hurl your magic across it—create an illusion of burning oil on the water? They'll have to turn back—and, meanwhile, the ships patrolling the coast will have arrived. They'll form a wall out at sea. Koph's ships will be bottled up; we may be able to fire them. There's a chance of our winning—not a strong chance, I'll admit—but a chance all the same. And at least we'll have tried. Can you help us?"

Yanuk put a protesting hand to his brow. "Siwara, you have no idea of the strain that maintaining the effect of fire on your galley cost me. Certainly I can help—but I don't know for what length of time. I'll do what I can."

They did not mention Orcher's jewel, but it was in their minds. Where was it and what had happened to it? Was Erlikh planning to take it to Koph? Had it been dropped into the sea? Had it been broken—and Orcher heedless?

It was twilight. They stared out to sea, Siwara's arm around Gene. Flaming ships were sullen red stars. And the war vessels of Koph were drawing closer to the harbor.

"They've beaten off my ships," she said tonelessly. "They're coming. Yanuk, it's time for you to make ready."

If it had been green, Yanuk's mail would have seemed part of his scaly body. He stroked it proudly as he nodded. "I'm going down to the river's edge. The closer I am to my fire, the better it will be."

Gene pulled from Siwara. "I'm going, too. My arm's not so bad that I can't fight at all."

But Siwara drew him back to her. "You're staying here."

"No," he said. "Nanich's my country now. And I'm fighting for it. There'll be others with wounds worse than mine, and they won't hang back. I can't watch from this roof, knowing that."

She sighed, kissing him without heeding the presence of the others. "As you will, Gene. But I'll go with you." She faced her generals. "I'll be as safe there as here. If Yanuk's magic fails—there'll be no safety anywhere in Nanich."

She helped Gene on with his mail, was assisted into hers. Someone brought a helmet for the man; she had one already. They left the roof, all of them, went down the stair.

In the street, Siwara gripped their hands in turn. "You're brave—so brave, all of you," she murmured shyly. Her voice blurred. "I can't say what I would—but you know what I am thinking." She smiled despite the tears in her eyes, sighed, gazing around at the buildings of Jolaise. "Nanich has been wonderful. Let us hope that it will be wonderful again. Good-by—perhaps."

She stepped into the cart that was to take them to the river, Gene and Yanuk joining her. They were followed by a band of men on foot.

They were on the roof of a warehouse whose windowless sides dropped into the river. Across

the deep stream were the indistinct white factories. It was night; sputtering torches, winking lamps lighted them.

The Koph ships were in the harbor, slowly moving along its edges, finding no anchorage. The air was blue-fogged and edged with smoke from the burning piers. Gradually the warships crept toward the river. Yanuk let three of them pass. Then his curtain of illusory flame rolled across the water.

Flaming missiles bombarded the snared enemy ships; great stones flying from the catapults splashed the water. The ships could not land; they were beaten off. They went up in flame. Dark heads bobbed in the water and sank, or managed to reach the shore and were driven back. Koph's three ships were finished.

Yanuk's magic flames swept away. The trap was open again. They waited, the fish creature feeling his head as though something were wrong with it. Another set of three vessels moved up into the river. A fourth started, was turned back by Yanuk's flame. The three ships suffered the destiny of their predecessors.

There was battle along the water front now. Several ships had succeeded in ramming the warehouses, pushing occasionally through the high stretches of mortared stone, smashing themselves, too. But the water was not deep. From the ships which had broken down walls, men leaped, scrambled over the rubble, battling for possession of the warehouses, sometimes winning. Other loads of men joined them. Koph's supply of warriors was apparently inexhaustible.

Hours reluctantly filed along, as though unwilling to leave so interesting a scene. Siwara and Gene drank stimulants, giving a cup to Yanuk during one of his periods of rest. He was weak, his protruding eyes pathetic. And more and more he rubbed a palm on his forehead. Until finally, his veil of fire thinned to a ghostly shimmer of pink, vanished. He dropped down, unconscious.

There was fighting in the streets! Shouts and the ring of steel arose from below. Gene and Siwara worked over the senseless Yanuk, sponging his brow, massaging him. He did not stir.

A battering-ram thumped on the bolted doors below. Gene and the few with him went down the stair, swords ready.

The bar of the metal door rattled; the ram's thrusts were clangorous. The doors strained inward, dented. Then the bolt broke out of the stone sockets, flew clattering. The doors crashed inward. Men of Koph poured into the entrance.

There was barely time for one sweep of a sword; Gene went down under the rush, was kicked by heedless feet against the wall. The soldiers of Koph flooded in, went up the steps—to Siwara.

Nanich fought bravely. Each house became a fortress, its women and children and old men wielding whatever weapons were at hand. But Koph's men swarmed out of ships which had been grappled together, stretching across the harbor like the pontoons of a bridge. And the ships from Nanich's coast had not arrived.

Koph paid greatly for its victory. But its men took barricade after barricade, successive citadels of dwellings. And in the end, as another twilight fell, gray with thickening clouds, Nanich fell, beaten. The coast ships never arrived. Part of Koph's fleet, expecting them, went out for them, sank them.

Nanich was beaten. What could be fired was burning. Smoke rolled up in wavering pillars to the clouds. Koph's men patrolled the streets.

Nanich and all that it had meant—Nanich was ended.

XVI.

The captives were being paraded through the streets. They dragged along to the shrill wailing of horns, the thudding boom of drums. They went past white houses whose walls above the doorways and windows were black where flames had spewed forth. They went past silent crowds of unarmed Nanich people and the troops of Koph soldiers, past the high piles of slain. Up the wide street, up the curve of the hill, toward Siwara's palace.

Gene was among them. He tottered along, filthy, dejected, his eyes on the ground. Where was Siwara? He raised his eyes to the stillness of the watchers, but the princess was not among them.

There were several rebellious attempts by the watchers to liberate the captives, quickly subdued by the soldiers of Koph. More corpses were dragged to the heaped slain, and the procession continued.

The gardens of Siwara's palaces had felt fire and trampling feet. Squads of Koph's men darkened the grass. Erlikh sat in judgment in a portico overlooking the ruined gardens. Beside him was Dann, but standing.

The captives were dragged to Erlikh, one by one. He smiled on them benignantly, and as each one came all that he said was, "Death."

But when Gene was brought to him he pushed his face forward, staring through the grime. He beamed with recognition. "Death for this man, too—but make it slow," he said pleasantly.

There were no more prisoners. Erlikh arose. Siwara's jewels—far too many of them to be worn all at once—gleamed dully in the gray light as though their fires had died with the downfall of Nanich. Erlikh lifted a hand, murmured to the men near him. He raised the hand higher, addressing the assemblage.

"Jolaise is ours—the key to Nanich! Nanich is

ours, therefore. It will become a colony of Koph." He went on to praise the men for their services, extolling the peculiarly questionable virtues of Koph, his shrill voice almost melodic with happiness. Gene did not listen, stood among the others under the death sentence, waiting.

Erlikh's soldiers brought Siwara out of the palace—and the jewel! The girl's eyes quested among the prisoners, glimpsed Gene, clung sorrowfully to him. Erlikh clutched the girl's shoulder, pushed her in full view of the crowd. He mocked her. So she had thought to fight off Koph! She was a fool! More than that. He dawdled with obscenities. The crowd booed, hissed.

It galvanized Gene. He stirred, his face contorted with anger. A whip caught him just under the eyes. He could not move his injured arm, but his good hand dragged on the whip. The man wielding it let it go, stepped up. The flat of his sword cracked on Gene's arm—and Gene's fingers dropped the whip.

Siwara faced the jeering men proudly. She tried to speak but she could not be heard. Erlikh pushed her back and ordered his men to raise the jewel. Though there was no sun to wake its fires, Orcher's blue token was starry with light. Erlikh's eyes gloated. A whisper of admiration rippled over the crowd, purely involuntarily as the jewel raised aloft glinted like a netful of azure stars.

Siwara acted. She pleaded with the men holding her. "Let me go! Let me beg mercy of Erlikh!" They released her—what harm could she do? She hurried to Erlikh, dropped on her knees before him, her hands reaching imploringly. The jewel was forgotten; the gathering shouted railleries.

Siwara had not gone to Erlikh for mercy. She was close to the men with the jewel. She whirled to one side suddenly, caught a leg of one of the men raising Orcher's gem. She did not topple him, but she surprised him, drawing his attention to her. He put down a hand to shove her away—and the heavy gem slipped in his grasp. Slipped—the others were thrown off balance; the jewel dropped from their hold. It cracked against the paving.

It did not break into fragments, but it must have split. Guards were running to the princess, hauling her to her feet, jerking her back. Gene took a forward step, was thrown back—

Out of the fissure in the jewel a pale streamer of mist arose. It coiled upward lazily, like a wisp of luminous blue smoke, unperturbed by the milling men. It climbed up as though drawing itself hand over hand up an invisible ladder, higher and higher, straight up to the clouds.

Erlikh was screeching imprecations for Siwara, commands to his men. He stopped in the middle of an order, cocked his head, eying the rising thread of blue. Silence gusted over the mob. Faces lifted, held to the sky. Gene looked up.

A spark appeared atop the spiraling smoke! A blue spark that grew as it slid down the luminous ribbon. There was no sound, and yet—the silence was melodious, like the stillness that follows the close of masterful music.

He recognized the ragged shape of blue fire that was rapidly enlarging—Orcher! But the men from Koph were panic-stricken. And as the flickering edges of the alien entity reached down, they scattered, terrified, pressing on each other, getting in each other's way, trampling fallen men into bloody rubbish. Siwara was forgotten—and Erlikh, and Dann. Gene could not use his arms, but he forged forward, shoving with his shoulders, until he was at Siwara's side.

Orcher hovered over them, a jerking blotch of fire that seemed to fill the very sky. The symphony of his voice tortured the atmosphere, stirring combative combers of wind.

"Koph—has landed on Nanich! Koph's lords would make war. They are a race of fighters. Good! Now I will teach them something about fighting!"

Orcher's restless outlines altered, subtly, something like a head, arms and legs jutting out, working in, protruding again. The harmonies of his voice were not composed for any human musical scale. Erlikh had run, and Dann. Perhaps they were in the palace. The dispersing mob united in a race for the water, the buildings—anywhere that was not so open as Siwara's gardens. But Gene and Siwara stood, the girl's arms around the man, her raised eyes worried but not fearful.

"Yes," Orcher said—and he was speaking to them. "I will teach them something about fighting."

His magnitude drifted forward, over the gardens. "Like this!" he said.

The air splintered as a trumpet blared, one that no man could blow. It was possible to see the sound-pulsing ripples of air packed together by the sound's vibration.

All over the fallen city, the mounds of the slain stirred. The bodies rolled, tumbling off each other, lay moving slowly, lifting hands jerkily, flexing their legs. They clambered to their feet—not alive, but like fleshly puppets jangling on unseen strings. Their closed eyes opened, glazed and without life. And the living in the streets stared in horror.

The bodies arose and took sides. They had no weapons; their hands curved like claws. Those from this mound crept forward to those of that, stealthily, pantherishly, crouched, swaying from side to side, preparing to pounce.

They leaped! It was gruesome, that battle of the dead! They tore at each other, rending gar-

ments, scratching skin, and no blood flowed. They could not die. Bones snapped, eyes were gouged —but the fighters did not fall. The watchers drew back, frantic with fear.

Orcher laughed! The sound was deafening, drumming. His contours wavered, threads of light unraveling, drifting leisurely over the city. They touched the fighting corpses, played over them like a sculptor's fingers pressing clay. He crushed the bodies together, squeezing them, smoothing the flesh.

And now there were giants on the streets—headless giants molded from dead flesh and contending against each other! Orcher's tendrils touched them; some of them merged into each other, producing monstrosities with many arms, many legs.

The giants grappled, tore, thirty and forty feet tall—lurching about the streets, blundering against dwellings as they struggled—and Orcher fingered them again. Those battling in little groups blended, became towering Titans; they stepped on the little houses, crushing them like paper boxes, as they groped about the city, seeking opponents.

The mighty shapes found each other, snatched up handfuls of masonry, hurled them like pebbles, swung myriad fists, tore limbs from each other, cast them through the air.

Orcher laughed! All the giants rushed together; the shock was like the snapping of a drum's taut skin. The giants coalesced into a monster who was not remotely human, a spidery thing all arms and legs. It reared up, flailing its limbs, tangling one in another, unknotted them, and started off toward the sea, picking its way daintily over the structures, gingerly stepping from street to street. It waded into the harbor, stirring waves that sprayed the shores, and began to toy with the ships from Koph.

It picked up one delicately between two claws, and squeezed! Flinders dropped down into the sea. It lifted two vessels, cracked them together like nuts, smashing them. It moved about from ship to ship, its talons whirring down, shattering the ships on the water.

There were no people on the streets. Only packed crowds huddling in the houses with bloodless faces, staring eyes, dumb with dread. But they heard Orcher's cry:

"I'm sending this agent of mine across the water —to Koph. He will repeat my instructions there!"

Siwara had fallen insensible; Gene lay beside her, his face turned to Orcher. The blue fire drifted away from the palace, hung over the sea.

"I'm not through with you yet." Orcher's blasting music was grim. "I'll teach you to make war!" In his passion his shape was nearly human; a colossus of blue radiance.

He threw up an arm, and the clouds churned as though beaten by a cyclone. Out of them streaked lightning globes. Orcher caught them and juggled them, hurling them thundering over the city, over the hills beyond. He ripped at himself, removing strips of flame. He wove them into a web, cast it up through the clouds, brought down tongues of writing colored fire. He dragged them one by one, swiftly shaped them, laying one above the other—building a city of the tortured splendors.

His voice beat down on the captured city like a sledge of sound. "So you would make war, would you—you puny microbes! But can you do this? And this? And this? Then what good are your wars—what good can they accomplish? Some of you wanted power—what are your powers beside mine? Can you fight me? Will one of you—all of you—come forth to try it?"

The city of flame crumbled, fading. Spheres of lightning winked all over the sky. Rain began to beat down, a steady gale to scream. The falling drops broke on the paving around Gene and the princess, throwing up lesser drops, making a restless mist. Their wet garments snapped against them sharply in the gale. It roused them. Orcher was moving across the sea.

In the howling hurricane, Gene rolled over on his knees, raised himself. Siwara revived and climbed to her feet as he crouched against the push of the wind, clinging to him. She called something to him, but he could not hear. She pointed—the wind dashed her hand aside—they wove through the wind's thrusts into the palace. Thunder exploded—it seemed over their very heads.

Men pressed to the walls like human shadows. Erlikh was there. He stumbled over to them. "Cease your magic! Bring the monster back from Koph! We'll grant peace—peace on any terms—"

Gene shook his head. "It's not magic. And we can't stop it."

They were in a bare anteroom. Siwara walked wearily down the hall, into a cavernous chamber, its tiles polished mirrorlike. The high windows had been smashed in by the wind; tapestries fluttered like dancing ghosts. It was murky in there; lightning glared in, dazzling.

In a corner, out of the wind, they could see the water. Orcher was coming back, heedless of the lightning globes. He pushed them aside as though they were buzzing insects. The waters were gray with foam.

"Stop that thing!" Erlikh cried. "Whatever you want—you can have it—only stop that thing of yours!"

Neither Gene nor the princess replied. Erlikh sank to his knees before them, but they did not heed him, their gaze fascinated on the mountainous waves sweeping in toward the city. Erlikh collapsed, his arms over his ears, weeping—

XVII.

Orcher was gone; the hurricane had subsided. There was peace in Nanich once again.

The people crept out of their shelters, gazed wordlessly at the wrecked dwellings, the fragments that had been Koph's fleet floating in the harbor. Siwara's galley drifted untouched; it was impossible that it had been spared from Orcher's vengeful monster and the waves by accident.

Around the city the people wandered, as though all of them had been set down in a strange place and were orientating themselves to it. They gazed at each other in unspoken comment, and their eyes were too eloquent with reminders of what had been. They turned from each other, shuddering.

They were not Nanich's people alone. Some of them were the warriors of Koph.

There were no dead in the streets to be recognized, wept over and buried. All the dead had been molded into Orcher's last mad fleshly creation which had disappeared over the water toward Koph.

The stranded warriors stood on the charred docks, gazing out to sea. Drawn into little groups, they began to prowl about the city, hungry. Some of them pushed into a dwelling, grim, silent—a woman was feeding her children. They snatched up the bread, the fruit and wine, and backed away, eating wolfishly. The children were frightened and drew back behind their mother, clinging to her.

She was not angry with the men. "You could have asked for the food," she said wearily. "We would have shared what we had. After what you have seen—do you still think that you can take what you like?"

They stopped eating, looked down to the floor, worried. Then they edged to the table and laid down what food they still held. They skulked out of the dwelling, abashed.

In the streets they came upon others from Koph, who had experienced something of the sort. They whispered together, beckoned others. And at last a crowd of them started up the street toward Siwara's palace on the hill.

Nanich people clearing the streets of debris looked up, shook their heads disapprovingly, and continued with the work. But one asked, "Where are you going?"

And a man called back, "To the palace of your princess! To ask for food! We cannot go back home. We must eat!"

The Nanich fellow laughed bitterly. "Curs of Koph! How does it feel to be beaten, eh? Starve! Die! Why should our princess care?"

Some of the Koph soldiers halted, hate in their eyes. A cloud slipped past the sun, dragging a shadow over the street. Unthinkingly they all looked up, the Nanich man, the warriors of Koph. Looked up, dread blanching their faces—but it was only a cloud in the sky, not Orcher.

After a long moment the Nanich man said timidly, "Forgive me. Come to my house—there is some food. I will speak to the others. You will be cared for."

Over a table in Siwara's palace, the princess and Gene conferred with Dann and Erlikh and others. Papers littered the table; there were ink jars and brushes, with which the group toyed as it talked.

"We could have two kings, one here, one in Koph," Dann said slowly. "They could alternate their rule, a year here, then a year there. Not much chance then for a misunderstanding to start between countries."

"Why kings at all?" Gene asked. "Why not representatives elected by the people for short terms? Then if the power falls into the wrong hands—it's the public's responsibility. And why two kingdoms? Why not—two States of one country?"

They considered that. A servant hurried in to them. "Princess! A number of people are coming up the hill to the gardens! They seem to be Koph men, yelling and waving their arms!"

Siwara arose, frowning. "Have they forgotten Orcher already?" She beckoned Gene as she went from the room; he followed with the others.

At a wide window overlooking the city they stared down at the approaching mob. As the faces grew nearer, they saw that there was no wrath on them—instead, wild joy. And the shouts were clearer: "Koph has rebelled! Koph has rebelled!"

The throng halted in the gardens. Only three men entered the palace. The princess and her company received them at the paper-strewn table.

"Yes, Koph has rebelled," one of the strangers said. He was a bit crude in his manners, awed by the splendor of the ornate room. "We've just arrived from Koph. A . . a monster appeared over there, wrecking the city, killing, burning—" He shuddered at the memory, lifting a shaking brawny hand to his mouth. There was a silence as he looked away in introspection. "Your magic monster, princess. And we turned against our lords. Your magic is strong. We would serve you."

Siwara smiled maternally on him, laying a light hand on his arm. "We were discussing the institution of a new scheme of government. You are hungry? Tired? No? Then sit with us and add your thoughts to ours."

The man glanced at the faces, a trace of awe lingering in his eyes. His lips tightened at Erlikh and Dann. "If *they* are to help—" he began, distrustfully.

Dann went to him. "We are no longer as we were," he said awkwardly, moistening his lips.

"We do not claim to have power. We are only people like you." He smiled, put out his hand. "Your voice is as good as ours."

The delegate from the new Koph took the hand for an instant, gulping. Then he sat on the edge of the great carved chair that Siwara had indicated, fingering its embellishments reverently.

Dann went back to his own seat. Siwara lifted a paper, pondered over its script. "Shall we continue?"

It was later, night. The city was gay now with lights strung on wires across its streets. People jammed the thoroughfares, flowing in and out of the houses, where signs proclaimed, "Vote here."

Siwara and Gene walked hand in hand among the people—and the others drew away from them, silent, seemingly frightened, no friendship in their eyes. The princess entered one of the polls with Gene, and all the bustling people stopped still as though the black angel of Death had come in.

Gene and the girl scanned the cold faces. "They fear us!" Siwara mourned. "Gene, it will never be the same again—they'll never love me."

They went out, their presence again stilling the merriment in the streets. They returned to the palace, sought Yanuk. He was in his suite, his robe splotched with mud, his hands busy shaping two immense clay things. Surely these were not intended to move about as had his other clay effigies. They were thirty feet long, and more like bridges than anything else. There were three bases to each of them, and thick spans of clay arched from support to support. But along the clay arcs, mathematically spaced, were—human hands.

Siwara asked, "Yanuk, what are you making?"

The sorcerer looked up, his eyes bleak. "These will row your ship back to my island. I'm sick of Nanich, Siwara. The people hate me. They think that I'm going to hurt them. I had thought that I would be happy, having friends at last! But no one likes me, except you and Gene."

He scraped clay from his fingers. "And why don't you join me? You're a princess no longer, Siwara, not after tonight. Will you live as the others? Keeping house for your man, while he works?"

"I don't see why not," Siwara said.

"The people won't be kind to you. They'll treat you like outcasts."

Gene said, "We can go to some other part of Nanich, where we won't be known."

But Siwara shook her head. "No, Gene. In all Nanich, I am known. We could go to Koph, though." It was clear that she did not like the thought.

They lived on in the palace. Then a group of dignitaries visited them. They bowed stiffly to Siwara, tempering respect for her discarded rank with the knowledge of their own importance.

"We represent the people, princess Siwara, that is," one of them said. "You have done much for Nanich. We are grateful. But—now you must do something more." He gestured sweepingly. "Go away!"

Siwara eyed Gene; their eyes conversed.

"Go away!" the representative repeated. "Your presence is no longer an asset. You make us all—shall we say, self-conscious? We mean to rule wisely. Unless you go, there will always be the fear that you will tire of the new conditions, the inevitable hardships, and use your magic against us for your own ends. Only by going can you prove your sincerity."

"They're right," Siwara said to Gene, who was unconsciously fingering his scarred cheek. "Shall we go then with Yanuk? Think of the garden! We'll be happy there." She turned to the others. "You will give me my galley?"

They eyed each other, counseling with glances. Their chief nodded.

Siwara said, "Then as soon as Yanuk is ready—we'll go."

Alone with Gene, she raised her hand. "They were right. We cannot stay. Look!" She raised a hand, its fingers misted by a blue glow.

He did not answer, only lifted one of his own hands. It glimmered with the same tinge.

Her galley was moored to a reconstructed dock. The pier and the streets along which she would

pass were packed with people who drew back, silent and fearful, at the sight of Yanuk's two clay bridges, which thudded along, three-legged, down the hill, Yanuk riding a litter, evidently asleep; his eyes were closed in concentration.

Behind him were Siwara and Gene, then men loaded with supplies for the ship; last of all the police of the new regime.

They boarded the ship. Yanuk's bridges settled down along the rowers' benches; the clay hands grotesquely unhooked the oars, held them ready. Gene stood at the tiller with the girl. Yanuk squatted down by the foremast, his thought controlling the movements of his rowing devices.

The rope was cast off. The vessel pushed from the pier, started out of the harbor. There were no cries of farewell, no good wishes, no waving hands among the clustered people. Only silence and grim faces.

Siwara looked back at them, sorrowfully, Gene's arms around her.

"We'll be happy on the island," he said. "It seems like the end? Well, perhaps it is. The end of human companionship and warmth. But, Siwara—for us it's only the beginning." He held up his hand, summoning the blue fire, and she understood.

"What good?" she sighed. "Years alone, aging, playing with dolls like Yanuk's!"

"No," he said. "Remember what Orcher told us in his temple? If we can learn—everything is ours. And we'll study. Yanuk will teach us; if Orcher is satisfied, *he* will teach us. One day we'll leave that island. But not in a ship, or like this! Unhindered by fleshly bodies—free to roam the Universe on wings of thought. Free to make, to break—like gods!"

She considered; nodded. "Perhaps immortal, like Yanuk. Side by side—forever!" She gazed back at Nanich, her sorrow lessening, fading away.

The ship glided farther out to sea, its oars dipping rhythmically. Farther and farther. To those on the pier its hulk was only a spot of dark on the sea.

The spot dwindled and vanished.

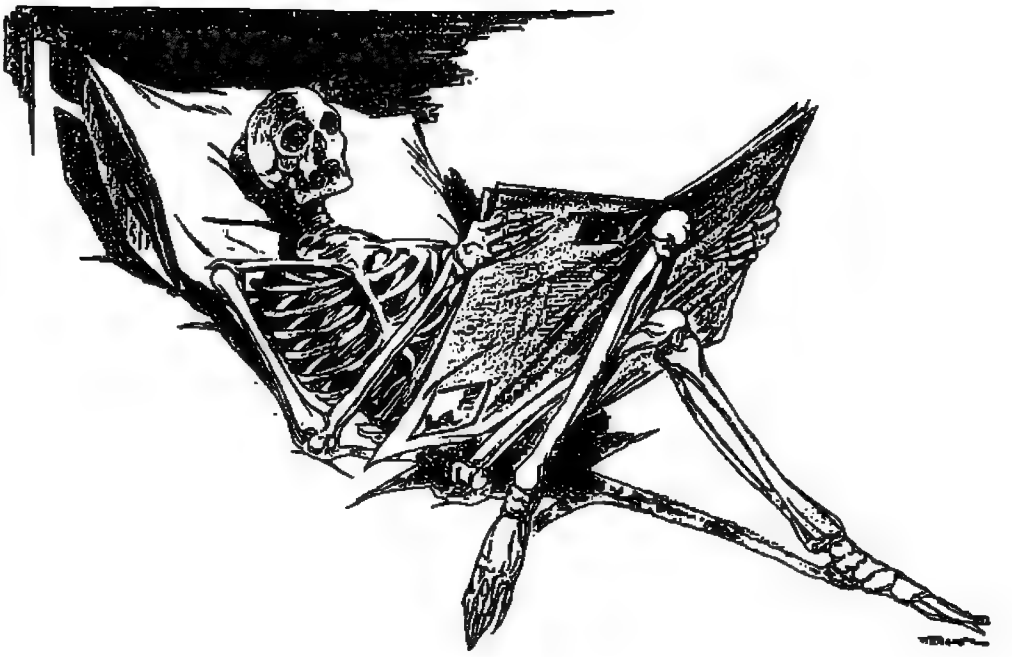
THE END.

WATCH DOG

By Frances Hall

Remorse is a quiet hound that keeps to heel;
He follows patiently—no whine or bark
That seeks a single word or look, till dark.
  Discreet black lips those shining fangs conceal;
The yellow, sleepy-lidded eyes reveal
By day no hot green fire, no fierce bright spark.
The great curved claws that leave their midnight mark
  Are sheathed; no sudden flex betrays their steel.

But late at night those awesome hackles rise;
  Those huge black paws begin their silent prowl.
Malignance glows unchecked from those wide eyes;
  The deep throat shapes a long, portentous growl,
And hard on my shrinking chest, my trembling thighs,
  He leaps with one tremendous hateful howl.



TRANSIENTS ONLY

By Mary MacGregor

④ An expert ghost-manager ought to be able to do a lot for a Washington boarding-house caught between OPA ceilings and a triple-decker mortgage, at that!

"Charles," said the mother, "you annoy me dreadfully."

"Sorry, mom," replied Charles without getting up or turning his head, "what have I done now?" He was lying stomach down on the floor, reading volume two of Lindemyth's celebrated work, "Spectral Character as Deduced From Behavior." The chapter immediately before him dealt with "Motivation."

"It is not what you have done, Charles," said his mother firmly, "but what you haven't done." She sighed. "You have no ambition; you're content with being a mere soda jerker; all you do is moon around the house, reading fool-books about spooks. And here, when Granny is about to lose her house, we can't do anything about it except sit back and let the bank take it. You're a man now—or at least you are as big as a man. You ought to be beginning to take on some responsibility. Though Heaven knows how you'll ever get anywhere with your head crammed full of rubbish about ghosts and things."

She sighed another reproachful sigh, pushed the cat out of her lap and rose. Charles rolled over and sat up, slamming the book shut as he did.

"Apparitions and manifestations are very interesting phenomena," he said, "and properly manipulated might be very beneficial—"

"There you go with your big words again," she snapped at him, and picked up his book gingerly, holding it at arm's length as if the very contact with it might contaminate her. "I suppose you are trying to say that spooks are some earthly good. Well, if you'll show me just one instance . just one, I say . . when a ghost is any use at all, I'll take back all I ever said. Fiddlesticks!

If there *was* such a thing as ghosts, the best they'd be would be a pesky nuisance."

"Yes, mom," he said meekly. He knew from long experience that there was no use arguing with his mother when she got off on that track. He got up languidly from where he sat, unfolding all his six feet of gawky lankness.

His mother glared at his mouth, hanging weakly open; noted for the thousandth time his pimple-spangled face and neck, his vacant dull eye and ill-kept hair; and wondered what curse she had been under that this changeling should have been foisted on her. But she knew that nagging did no good; she had tried that long enough. So she sighed once more and said wearily, "I do wish you'd get a better job." Then she went back toward the kitchen.

Charles sat down in the chair she had vacated, picked the cat up and reinstated it. Then he looked thoughtfully into its provocative green eyes as he softly stroked its fur. He was pondering the complex of problems that somehow in the last five minutes had knitted themselves all into one, come to a crisis, and demanded solution. There was the sordid business of making money—which bored him, but which was expected of him. There was the old battle about his fondness for lore of the supernatural and phantasmal. And now there was the present family emergency—Granny and her involved financial affairs.

Granny was incredibly ancient, but somehow she managed. For one thing she had a house, an old brick affair on "O" Street, not far from Dupont Circle. In bygone days when the great foreign embassies were clustered about that circle the house had been thought a mansion. But long since it had been cut up into many small rooms, occupied for the most part by low-paid government clerks. The pittances paid in by the tenants had heretofore been enough to feed and dress the old lady, but there had never been enough over to more than pay the taxes, keep the antiquated plumbing in working order or the roof from leaking unbearably. There certainly was not enough to do anything about reducing the triple layer of mortgages. Indeed, during the depression years there had not been enough income even to keep abreast of the interest. In those days the banks were generous—being already glutted with foreclosed real estate—but now that was changed. Another great war was on, the city's landlords were in their seventh heaven. One could grant cot space as a gracious favor and still charge a price for it that would have shamed a Capone. That being so, the bank became obdurate. It was time, they said, to fork over a little cash. Or else.

Charles contemplated that ultimatum for a long while. He was fond of his granny in his own peculiar way, and he hated to see the old house go. So he puckered his brow and thought. In all fairness it should be said that Charles was not the goof he looked. It was not that he lacked brains or ability that set him apart from the herd and made him seem inferior. It was that his brain operated in a realm unconsidered by most other people. His thoughts ran in different channels, and though often arriving at the same destination as those of the more orthodox thinkers, proceeded by a route exceedingly devious and bizarre. Now that he faced a dilemma caused by his grandmother's financial crisis and made difficult by his peculiar attitude toward life, he let the queer mechanism of his mentality slip into gear and begin grinding its way out of the mess of conflicting desires that beset him.

In a little bit he came to several conclusions. Out of his analysis emerged one prime villain. That villain was the governmental agency known as the OPA. It was that supposedly beneficent office that had upset the apple cart. They said Washington rents were too high. They froze them where they were. Worse, they walked back the cat and pushed them down to levels near where they used to be. That was what was ruining granny. For the prices of the things she used were up. It did not help her that every room and cubbyhole in the house was occupied by a paying tenant, or that there was a constant stream of eager would-be tenants forever at the door. Notwithstanding the demand, she could only get so much. Therefore, unless something was done speedily she would surely lose the house.

Charles arrived at another very clear fact. The OPA was too big to be bucked. Also the bank was too big to be bucked. He had neither powerful friends nor money. The problem defied all solution by ordinary means. But then Charles rarely thought of things in ordinary terms. He gazed into the enigmatic green eyes of the purring animal on his lap and knew at once what he must do. The time for reading and theorizing had past. The time for action had come. He must put his books away and apply the special knowledge he had acquired and the curious talents he knew he must possess. He reached his decision. What could not be done by usual means must be done by the unusual. He required assistance from the spectral world. And that indicated most clearly that he must seek out a ghost and take counsel with him.

Some would have thought that a queer decision. Not Charles. It was so obviously a reasonable one that he would have thought it silly to even challenge it. Writs, warrants and injunctions mean nothing to ghosts. Ghosts could get away with things that no mortal could hope to. Hence the imperative need for making contact with a first-class phantom at once.

"Oh, mom," called Charles. "I'm going out for

a while. When I get back I'll fix up things for granny."

He dumped the cat on the rug, spent five minutes in his room, and then was gone. Ten days later his mother anxiously frowned and chalked off another date on the calendar.

"Charles is *so* queer," she muttered unhappily. "It's going on two weeks now, and all he said was that he was going out 'for a while.' I do wonder what he's up to."

Charles was traveling. When he left home he withdrew what money he had in a savings bank and bought a rickety old flivver. Then for days and days he hunted ghosts. His jellopy browsed through side roads and country lanes, always on the lookout for gaunt and abandoned houses. There were not many, for the war boom was making itself felt all over the country. Few houses were vacant; and of those, fewer still had the reputation of being haunted. Charles made it a rule to spend his nights in such houses, but the experiences were disappointing. Either the spectral population of the region had emigrated or were ineffective practitioners of their art. For though he slept in many gloomy and dilapidated places, not once did he experience anything that could not be explained rationally. Stairs and floor boards did creak, but houses do settle. Loose tin screeches in the breeze, and sudden chilling eddies of night air often give ghostly effects, but not sufficiently so to convince a connoisseur such as Charles. Not that he had ever seen a ghost in the flesh, so to speak, but his reading had been most extensive.

Then one day, when he was about ready to give up in disgust, he saw the place he was after. It was in central Pennsylvania, and it met every specification the most exacting ghost hunter could demand. It was on a hill well off the highway, and there was no gate in the fence or road to it that Charles could see, so he stopped beside the road and gazed up at the somber place in frank admiration. It bore all the stigmata of an accursed spot. It not only looked as a haunted place would look, but seemed to exude a mysterious and ominous something that chilled the flesh and filled the heart was foreboding. Charles was thrilled to the marrow. At last!

Though it was mid-July and everywhere else the fields were lush and green and the trees in heavy leaf, the hill on which the house stood was as a negative oasis. What trees there were were stark and lifeless, gray or black or a scabrous white, except that to some still clung a few dried brown leaves of some long-past autumn. Where grass should have been there was but brakes of sear brush, thorny and wiry. No living thing was to be seen except a wheeling carrion bird patrolling his beat high above the house itself.

The house was too far away to be clearly distinguishable, but there was an air of brooding tragedy about it that was unmistakable. It must have been very old, and untenanted for many a year. Its roof sagged, one of its chimneys had toppled, and all the windows gaped darkly vacant as do eye sockets in a skull. And as Charles looked he thought he heard the vibrant tones of a great gong struck, followed by a piercing scream. He listened to the uncanny sounds with something akin to glee. Then he drove on, for it was yet early in the afternoon.

Four miles beyond he came to the village. He parked his jenny and approached an elderly bearded man who sat on the steps of a store whittling diligently on a sliver of white pine board.

"Can you tell me, mister," asked Charles, "what is the history of that empty house back down the road?"

The old man looked up at him, studying him with manifest disapproval. Charles did not realize that the jubilant leer he wore added no beauty to his pimply and allegedly moronic face.

"The less you know about that house, bud," croaked the ancient, "the better off you'll be. You shouldn't even have looked at it. It's poison. It's jinxed. There's a ha'nt on it."

"Somebody murdered there once upon a time?"

"Couldn't say. Nobody knows. It's always been ha'nted."

"Anybody ever prove it?"

"Uh-huh. Plenty. Back in the eighties the two Tarbell brothers and another fellow went there on a dare to spend the night. They was found hung the next day—up in the attic of the house. Every ten years or some other smart-Aleck would get the yen to go and see whether the place was haunted, as if anybody with ears couldn't hear the yells and screaming that go on there without getting closer'n a mile to the place. They all hung themselves or went crazy."

"Did any scientists ever look into it?" persisted Charles.

"Yep. The very last guy that went there. That musta been all of twenty years ago. He was a professor fellow from New York—called hisself a psychic-research worker. He went up there one dark, stormy night. We found him next day wandering in the fields, his hair white as snow and his skin as yellow as a lemon. The stuff he babbled was something awful—what you could understand of it, 'cause he kept on screaming and goin' into fits whenever he'd try to talk. Si Hall's oldest boy—a kid about like you—went crazy just from hearing him. They took 'em off to the insane asylum, but I don't think the professor lived more'n a week after that."

"Nobody would care, then, if I went down there and spent the night?" asked Charles.

"You're darn tootin' somebody cares," said the old man dryly. "We got too tarnation many graves

in our Potter's Field now to be addin' any more at the county's expense. Take my advice, young spud, and keep on goin' aheadin' the way you are."

"Thanks, pop," said Charles.

The sun was setting when Charles found the place where the old road had gone in. Few vestiges of the road were left, and there was no gate. Someone had replaced it with a barbed-wire panel years before and put up a sign against trespassing. But Charles let neither impediment stop him. He dismounted from his jellopy and clipped the strands of wire with a pair of side-cutting pliers. Then he boldly drove in.

Things started happening at once. The tin lizzie bucked, snorted and backfired, but he fed her more gas, yanked savagely at the spark, and forced her through the dead grass and brush that covered the old trail. But the confident, cocksure Charles almost screamed when he became acutely aware of something cold and slimy slithering down his neck. It was as if someone had emptied a bowl of ice-cold gelatin inside his shirt front except that this stuff squirmed and crawled. It slid past his belly and came to a wiggly stop just above his lap. It was his first real experience with spectral artistry, and his reflexes won. Before he could stop himself he had ripped his clothes open and was tearing at the substance with clawing hands. But there was nothing there! Then Charles laughed. No, it was not the crazed laugh of a man suddenly demented. It was a low, deprecatory laugh—the kind a person uses when he appreciates the joke is on him. Pretty slick. Good old ghosty. Charles had the consoling feeling that his quest was near, its end.

The car pushed on up the hill, but complainingly. It groaned and vibrated as if it bore tons of load and the grade were ten percent instead of a mild three. Then the going got rough and bumpy. Charles looked out and saw that by some mysterious and silent process all his tires had gone flat. At that moment the engine coughed its last and died. A moment's inspection under the hood showed there was nothing the matter. Lizzie simply did not choose to run.

It was nearly dark by then, and Charles saw to his surprise that he was much nearer to the house than he thought. It was also much farther to the gate than he thought. It would be impossible to return to the highway on foot and reach it before pitch darkness came. Pretty clever, thought Charles. This spook's technique is good!

He left the car and trudged ahead. He observed now that he had been wrong about the lifelessness of the old farm. Great, torpid, repulsive-looking toads were everywhere. They did not move, even to avoid being stepped on, but they stared at him with malevolent yellow eyes and squished nastily whenever he happened to plant his foot on one. There were snakes, too, squirming off the weedy path and hissing venomously. Charles strode on, delighted. Things could not possibly be better.

Something white and roundish, like a misshapen bowling ball, came bounding out of the brush and rolled to a stop before his feet. There was scarcely any light left then, but enough to let Charles see that the object was a freshly severed human head —that of a fair young woman with honey-colored hair. He tried to step around it, but it perversely managed to be always where he was about to put his foot. So he calmly kicked it out of his path and went on, despite the fact that as he did a soul-chilling wail rent the air.

Though Charles' confidence in his mastery of himself—thanks to his earnest study of the learned Lindemyth and others—was unabated by these little incidents, yet it troubled him that, now that night was falling, the gloom deepened so fast, for he had hoped to reach the doorway of the house before pitch dark arrived. But hurry as he would, unseen things, like wiry creeping vines, caught and dragged at his feet. He stepped out of them time and time again, but by the time he reached the ruined house there was nothing he could distinguish about it but its bulk looming in the inky blackness.

He found the door—by groping—and pushed it open, heedless of the raucous screech of its rusty hinges. Then he was inside in Stygian darkness. The door slammed to with a bang, agencies unimaginable shot bolts home with resounding clunks, and heavy chains were being arranged. Charles knew by those sounds that the door was closed and barred. He knew better than to feel behind him to verify the fact, for he was almost certain that by then there was indeed no door at all! For the first time that evening qualms of unease shuddered through him, and he felt the goose flesh rise and his back hair bristle. But he turned his mind at once back to Lindemyth and repeated to himself the consoling words, "—all such manifestations must be accepted for what they seem to be, and the investigator on no account should attempt to rationalize the irrational."

Charles' train of thought was rudely interrupted. He stumbled and fell face down. A swift exploration with his hands revealed that the obstacle was the torso of a man, recently trimmed of its extremities, judging from the pool of sticky liquid in which it lay. He chose to ignore it, and scrambled to his feet. He went on, but at a slower pace. The floor was tricky, being full of holes of indeterminable depth. He skirted several such and eventually found the stairs. Up above there was a wan light that seemed to emanate from the house itself—incredibly faint and of a phosphorescent green, but almost enough to see by, though one could never be sure.

Near the top of the stairs Charles came upon a fresh impediment. It was the swinging corpse of a hanged man. It oscillated erratically, and all of Charles' efforts to duck past it were in vain. After the fourth try he thought of a way to bypass it. He took off his necktie and tied it firmly about the feet that thrice had kicked him. Then he hauled out the other end, dragged the dead feet to the banisters and lashed them there to the handrail. Somewhere in the ghastly greenish gloom above him a demoniac chuckle broke the silence. Charles went on up the stairs. The pallid light was getting brighter. Soon, perhaps, one might actually see.

The upper hall was full of phantasms. They were amorphous creatures, scuttling about the floor or dashing here and there on batlike wings. Some howled, some twittered, others moaned lugubriously. Invisible hands plucked at Charles' clothes, unseen fingers twitched his hair. Prickly things flapped against, leaving his skin slimy and tingling. Once a pair of soft arms stole about his shoulders and he was startled to feel warm, moist lips pressed against his cheek in passionate caress. Then the little mouth bit, and bit hard—right into the jugular.

"Lay off," growled Charles, giving the lady apparition a savage jab in the midriff.

She evaporated like a cloud of drifting smoke. Then Charles saw a truly astonishing thing—the one thing perhaps that he was quite unprepared for. The lights came on suddenly and the hall was in full glare. A man appeared. He was well built and good-looking, in khaki shorts and a polo shirt. He seemed normal in every respect, even when he wheeled and bellowed at the cringing monsters that had drawn away from him and were huddled along the walls.

"Scat, you hellions," roared the man. "Back to your stinking caverns. Begone!"

They went. The man turned and approached Charles with outstretched hand and a beaming smile on his face.

"Glad to see you, Charles. Welcome to Haggard House." The handclasp he gave Charles was firm and real. "I trust this vermin—"

"Oh, no," said Charles, "not at all. you are Mr.—"

"Throckmorton, sir, and at your service."

Then he vanished amidst peals of mocking laughter. That is, all of him vanished except the hand and forearm that still clung in friendly greeting to Charles' palm. It was disconcerting, especially since it drooped like a bit of rubber hose. Charles stared down at the odd fragment, for a moment stupefied. He turned it over in his hands rather dazedly, after which he made a masterly effort to regain his self-possession. He loosened the grasp of the clutching fingers, and nonchalantly tossed the grisly souvenir of his host down the stairs. There was a dull boom and a flare of crimson flame when it struck. Then the darkness came back.

Charles tried the door to one of the rooms. It gave before his touch and he looked in. That time he shrieked without reserve. Prepared though he was by the sages Lindemyth and Strobius, the inhabitants of that room were more than mortal eyes could endure. What he saw was unutterably horrible, indescribable. He backed away, leaned against the jamb of the door and vomited freely and frankly. After a short spell of violent trembling he took up his quest again.

The next room was filled with scores of pairs of balefully gleaming eyes that glared at him in the darkness. He shut that door, too, and passed on. Every room but the last was stuffed with weird horrors. Even that one; but its horror was relatively moderate, both in conception and execution. In the middle of a large four-poster bed lay a giant skeleton, calmly reading a newspaper by the light of his own luminous bones. He stirred clackingly as Charles entered, bent his eyeless gaze upon him for an instant, and then went back to his reading.

"Sorry," said Charles, walking straight to him, "but you'll have to scram. I'm getting tired of the show and want your bed so I can sleep a while. You can carry on again tomorrow."

"Oh, yeah?" said the skeleton, without looking up.

"Yeah."

Charles reached over and got a good grip with one hand on the vertebrae of the neck and with the other grabbed the pelvis. He straightened up and heaved the collection of bones hard against the wall. It flew apart at the impact and its pieces scattered over the floor. As their illumination faded out, Charles crawled into the bed and pulled the covers up. Then he turned over and went fast asleep.

It must have been near dawn when he woke again, for by then the moon had risen and a great beam of its silvery light flooded in through the window. Charles was slightly discomfitted when he awoke by the realization that he must have been screaming, for his heart was pounding fiercely, his throat was sore, and his neck muscles rigid and tense. He lay back and relaxed; then suddenly remembered what it was that had troubled his sleep. He looked up, and there it was, dangling from a rafter. It was his own body, hung there by his own hands.

"I gotta have a look at that," said Charles, intensely interested and quite calm again.

He crawled out of bed and walked over to it. But it swayed too much and was hung too high for him to see it well. He found a chair and stood up on it, face to face with his dead self.

Yes, the resemblance was astonishing! He tried to bend over to examine it more closely, but found he could not. Something restrained his neck. He looked at his counterfeit double again, but that time what he saw was a different story. He was not looking at himself hanging, but at a mirror! Most damning of all, he noticed now that in addition to the rope around his neck by which he was suspended, his ankles had been caught and tied in a loop of his own necktie and hauled over and lashed to a staircase rail!

The full horror of his situation burned into Charles' soul, and for one awful moment his sanity almost left him. He tried to cry out, but the strangling cord about his neck would not let him. But just before he slid into the blackness of irrevocable death, his common sense came back to him.

"Shucks, Mr. Throckmorton," he said, without the slightest difficulty, "I'm surprised at you. I thought you were a high-powered spook. And then you go and pull an ancient gag like this on me. You're getting stale, or tired, or something, Mr. Throckmorton. Why don't you go take a little nap?"

Blam! Charles found himself sitting hard on the floor. He got up, a little sheepishly, and found the bed again. Five minutes later he was snoring serenely.

The day dawned bleak and gray, with driving mists. Charles woke up quite normally. He had been wrong about the bed. There was no bed or any other furniture. There wasn't anything. He was lying on the bare floor of a cobweb-festooned room which was in an advanced state of disrepair. The ribs of lathing showed through where patches of plaster had fallen away, water dripped through rents in the roof. Charles got up and examined himself. He was all there except for the necktie. He supposed he would find that on the way downstairs.

It was an uneventful day, spectrally speaking. The only manifestations Mr. Throckmorton chose to make were a series of odors. At times he would afflict the house and vicinity with waves of that unpleasant smell one encounters in morgues. There were other stinks, all offensive, usually of the putrescent order. All of which delighted Charles still further. For it indicated that his host was indeed a competent practitioner, since he could put across his illusions regardless of the hour. Charles rightly—so he learned later—supposed the reason for the paucity of exhibits that day was that Mr. Throckmorton's shade was exhausted from his efforts of the night. The presence of the imperturbable Charles—well, the *almost* imperturbable Charles—must have been a heavy jolt. For Charles knew full well that most normal beings would have fled screaming and babbling from the house at the first onslaught, whereas he had stuck and forced the shade to go through his whole bag of tricks.

However, Charles was wrong on that last assumption. Throckmorton had not exhausted his repertoire by any means. The second night he treated Charles to an entirely different series of newer, bigger, and better horrors. It was very trying, but Charles weathered the grueling test. Then came the day—another day of relative inaction, marked only by an assortment of apparitions of the type generally associated with the screaming-meemies. On the third night Mr. Throckmorton went all out. In addition to a troop of demons, he brought earthquakes, lightning, and ultimately fire. The illusion of the house burning to the ground and its walls caving in was the best of the lot. But Charles, not to be outdone, chose the hottest region of the blazing structure for his own counter-demonstration. There he quietly lay down in the midst of the phony roaring flames—and went to sleep.

Mr. Throckmorton was the first to break. Charles had just made a trip to his stalled automobile for another package of sandwiches when he found his host had materialized again. This time he wore the habiliments of an ordinary businessman. He was sitting in the doorway of the house, morosely staring at the ground, and biting his lips in unconcealed mortification. Charles approached him with all due civility. He did not want to humiliate the specter. His entire aim was to test him, first, and then to bring him to a state of mind where he would be amenable to reason. For Charles had important and pressing business to transact with the ghost.

"Nice place, you've got," said Charles, by way of opening. "You put on a good act, too."

"Gr-r-r-r," said Mr. Throckmorton, out of the depths of his disgust. "Don't kid me. The act stinks. It *must* stink. I must be slipping." He was very miserable. His deflation was complete.

Charles waited politely, saying nothing.

"Tell me, kid," asked the unhappy phantom, "why did you go out of your way to come here and discredit me who have done you no harm? Why am I persecuted like this?"

"Oh, shucks, Mr. Throckmorton, you've got me wrong," Charles hastened to assure him. "I think you're swell. Really I do. As a matter of fact, you're just the sort of ghost I'm looking for. I've been shopping around for one and you're the first I've bumped into that actually knows his onions."

"But, kid," groaned Mr. Throckmorton, still unappeased, "if I'm so good, why didn't I scare you? I have everybody else. I've driven strong men to madness and wise guys to suicide. What did I do wrong this time?" It was almost a wail.

"Because I believe in you," said Charles with

fullest sincerity. "They didn't. That's why they cracked up."

"Huh?" The ghost wavered and almost vanished at that astonishing statement. "Y-you mean it was the other way around, don't you?"

"Not at all." Charles was very glad of the chance he now had of airing some of the special knowledge he had been at such pains to acquire. "Strobius in his monograph on 'Successful Haunting' treats of that very particularly. He calls it the 'Phasmic Paradox.' He points out that ghosts differ from all other myths in that their power is derived from disbelief in them, not belief."

"I always bogged down when it came to philosophy," complained Mr. Throckmorton.

"It's not so complicated," said Charles. "You didn't scare me because I do believe in you. I know you are an illusion, even if you do look as solid and real as that doorstep you're sitting on. My senses accept what they see and feel, but my judgment is unaffected. I can take it or leave it—either way. Now if I didn't believe, I would also see and feel you, but since my judgment refuses to believe what my senses report, it gets into a panic and goes to pot. It's as simple as that. To a fellow like me who knows what it's all about, the wackier the stuff you pull, the easier it is to believe in it. As an illusion, of course."

"Sounds involved," remarked the specter. "but maybe you're right."

Charles then sketched out the predicament of his grandmother, and made his proposition.

"Oh," said Mr. Throckmorton. "I take it you want me to haunt the bank officials so they'll relent. Or is it the OPA guys you want me to go after?"

"Neither. It's Granny's house I want haunted."

"But, kid," remonstrated the ghost, "that doesn't make sense. No ghost ever helped a house by haunting it. Look at this one. Why, if I went there I'd scare all the people out of it in a couple of shakes. After that the house wouldn't be worth a damn to her or you or the bank or anybody else."

"Oh, I don't know," insisted Charles. "It depends on how we handle it."

They argued on for quite a while. At first the apparition that represented the long-departed

Throckmorton refused categorically to have anything to do with the project. It was silly. The kickback would be terrible. Better leave well enough alone. Moreover, he liked his present stand. He had haunted the place steadily and with signal success for the better part of a century. He felt he owed it to the community not to leave.

"I have quite a reputation here, you know," he said very proudly, as if everyone didn't know.

"What does it buy you?" asked Charles sharply. He had not read the wise words of the sages for nothing; he knew more about spectral motivation than many ghosts did themselves. Ghosts, as Strobius several times remarked, were lamentably lacking in the analytical approach to their own problems. Charles promptly pursued his question with a clincher.

"Ghosts lead lonely lives, don't they? And the only fun they can ever hope to get out of it is scaring people, isn't it?"

"Er, yes," admitted the phantom grudgingly.

"O. K. Let's look at the record. You've gotten so good that nobody in his right mind will come near you. You've had just one customer in the past twenty-five years, and you went at him so hard that you drove him nuts in the first fifteen minutes. How long before you expect to hook another sucker? But if you come to Washington with me I can guarantee at least—"

Charles poured on his sales talk. He *had* to have the aid of Mr. Throckmorton. So he kept on hammering. Mr. Throckmorton began to weaken. His resistance become more and more feeble, until finally he surrendered.

"All right. I'll give it a fling. They won't miss me here for a while."

Charles brought the flivver to a halt before his grandmother's house. The drive had taken longer than he expected, for it was close to midnight when they arrived. He leaned over and spoke to the invisible passenger beside him.

"This is the house. Hop to it. See you tomorrow."

The shade flitted away with a faint sighing sound; Charles drove calmly on.

When he let himself into his own home, his mother heard the key grate in the lock and came running anxiously out of her room. She clutched her errant child to her and patted him feverishly on the back.

"Where, oh where have you been so long, Charles?"

"Ghost hunting, that's all," "Granny'll be all right now."

"You poor, poor child," the alarmed mother soothed, "you run on to bed. You must be tired. Tomorrow we will go out to St. Elizabeth's and see the doctor."

"Why?" he asked, amazed. He wasn't sick and he wasn't crazy. One explanation suggested itself. "Granny hasn't been here *already*, has she?"

"Why, of course not, Charles. What an odd question. You know she hasn't left that house of hers for years. Why would she come here this time of night?"

"Dunno. Hunch, maybe—"

There was an imperative double ring at the front door. Charles started guiltily. He had either dawdled too long at the garage, or else Mr. Throckmorton—

The opening of the door revealed a cop and a taxi driver standing on the steps. Between them they supported Granny, who was in a complete state of jitters. She was weaving about and making little twittering noises, sobbing spasmodically now and then by way of emphasis.

"A stroke, mum, or a nightmare," said the cop. "I found her wandering in the street. She said she was all right, but she wouldn't go back to her house, no matter what happened—"

"Ooooh!" wailed the old lady.

"Knowing she was kin to you, I brought her here."

They took her in and put her to bed. She was in a bad way at first, but a couple of slugs of chloral quieted her down. She kept muttering about the terrible things that were going on in her house, but Charles comforted her.

"Don't worry, Granny. I'll go over in the morning and straighten things out. Leave everything to me."

With that he went to bed and slept the sleep of the just. All was well within his peculiar private world. Mr. Throckmorton had lived up to his instructions faithfully and promptly.

Charles was true to his word. Bright and early the next morning he walked over to Granny's place. But early as it was, there were many of the neighbors on the sidewalks, standing about in little clusters, whispering among themselves and looking at the old "O" Street house with something akin to awe. Admittedly the house did look a bit the worse for wear, for a number of its windows were broken, and bits of personal effects strewed the tiny front yard. An ominous sight to Charles was the fire truck parked before the house, not to mention a police car, a service car from the utility company, and a press car. Had Mr. Throckmorton's easy successes gone to his head, and in his excitement had he let go and really gone to town?

As he neared the stoop, Charles passed close to several of the knots of people. He heard snatches of what they were saying. "Explosion? . . . No, police say no. . . . But people were screaming and jumping out the windows. . . . Where did they go? Don't know, can't find any. . . Oh,

no, couldn't have been murder, there wasn't any blood. . What was all the screaming for?"

Charles displayed his door key to the cop in charge. The fire truck was pulling away and the other inspectors were going.

"What seems to be the trouble, officer?" Charles asked, squirming miserably inside himself.

"Damfino," said the cop. "When a lot of people take a notion to leave a house all at once and don't bother to open doors or windows when they do—well, they must have been a hurry. That's all I can say. We've gone over the joint with a fine-tooth comb and we can't find anything wrong. You say you are the grandson and business manager of the owner? Swell. You take over then. I'm sick of it."

Charles went on in and looked around. The tenants had left in haste; there could be no doubt of that. Splintered doors hung crazily, and every kind of personal possession could be seen scattered over the doors—stockings, letters, cameras, burst suitcases, all manner of things. He went over the house from basement to attic. Not one of its thirty-six tenants had stayed. The exodus was complete. Which was exactly what he wanted, though he deplored the abruptness with which it had been conducted. Which in turn reminded him to call in the neighborhood handy man to do something about rehanging the doors and reglazing the windows.

They worked all morning. By a little after noon Charles had the situation well in hand. He had been entirely unable to raise Mr. Throckmorton, either by calling to him out loud or using a telepathic summons. No doubt the phantom was off somewhere asleep, resting from his exertions of the night. Meantime Charles collected the tremendous quantity of abandoned impedimenta and stored it neatly in one of the basement rooms. He made the beds and swept out. The house had every appearance of being back to normal. Charles also received a piece of gratifying news. The carpenter told him that the neighborhood had settled down, content that they had doped out the explanation of last night's mystery. "The kind of people that are coming to Washington these days!" they said; the rough stuff was the natural result of a drunken party. So he stepped out onto the stoop and hung up the sign, "Vacancy."

The first to ring the doorbell was a tall, well set-up man who exuded vitality and confidence from every pore. Judging from his prosperous, confident air, Charles took him to be a high-pressure salesman come to the city to grab his share of commissions. He carried two heavy, handsome bags.

He snapped up the first room shown him—the best in the house—and expressed amazement to find so comfortable a room. He shelled out the twenty dollars called for by the posted ceiling price for the room with a haste that was almost pathetic.

"It's only fair to tell you," warned Charles, "that some folks say this house is haunted."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the fellow. "Swell. After sleeping for two weeks on billiard tables and in barber chairs, I'd rent a vault in the cemetery if they'd put a cot in it and put in a shower bath. Bring on your spooks."

"Yes, sir," said Charles, but whether in acknowledgment or agreement he did not make clear.

By the time he was back downstairs there were two more prospective tenants. He installed them both at once. One was an arthritic old gentleman who managed the stairs only with the greatest difficulty. The other was a very determined-looking young female who said little, and that tartly. She disapproved of everything shown her, but she took a room and paid for it. She had been commuting from Baltimore for a week and knew a good thing when she saw it.

Charles was gratefully counting the morning receipts when two more applicants came. They were giddy young things from the Midwest, come to Washington in search of secretarial jobs. They asked, not too hopefully, whether there was any chance of getting a room.

"Oh, yes," smiled Charles, employing his newly acquired professional manner. But halfway through the formation of his smile it froze as was, crooked and incomplete. For down the stairs stole that gruesome, awful, morguish smell, and the two noses facing him wrinkled in dismayed disgust. One of the gals gagged feebly. Charles tried frantically to communicate with Mr. Throckmorton, sending out an appealing telepathogram—"Lay off, lay off . . . not now not yet."

But Mr. Throckmorton's ghost was too occupied to notice. From the upper reaches of the house came an angry roar followed immediately by the thudding crash of a heavy piece of furniture overturned. The roar rose swiftly in pitch and intensity like the siren of a departing destroyer, until it reached a wailing howl that was suddenly damped by a choking, startled gasp. At that moment the supersalesman appeared briefly at the top of the staircase, then came down it at one fell leap, touching nothing on the way. Charles, remembering the fate of some of the house's other doors, thoughtfully snatched the front one open just in time to let the plunging tenant pass through. Then he turned to see that the departing guest had bowled over one of the waiting prospects. She had sat down hard against the baseboard, and was regarding him with a pained expression.

"My word!" giggled the other would-be secre-

tary still on her feet. "It must have been a *very* important appointment he forgot."

Charles had no time to reply. More was going on above. A female voice was scolding in biting words—a nerve-racking scream—wolfish cries—the clink of shattering glass. Then the young woman of the acid manner—no longer acid—came down the stairs. Whatever the alleged weakness of her sex or the presumed handicap of her hampering skirts, she did well. She neatly tied the supersalesman's record of getting down the stairs and out of the house in virtually no time at all.

Charles glanced down at the two still with him in the hall. But they were out of the picture. They had folded limply and lay quietly where they fell. He was still staring blankly at them when he realized he must make way for still another tenant leaving. It was the crippled gentleman who apparently had elected to try *his* hand at the stairway record. He failed to better it, perhaps because he neglected to bring his cane along; but at least he made a commendable effort. Charles caught no more than a glimpse of him as he flashed by on the way out, but he did see the green about his gills and the wild expression in his eyes.

"Dear me," thought Charles, and he started over to resuscitate the girls. But some subconscious sense of urgency had already aroused them and they were crawling whimpering toward the door. Their eyes were averted from him, and the moment they crossed the threshold of the house, they jumped to their feet and scurried down the steps.

"Changed their minds, I guess," observed Charles, ruefully, thinking of the twelve cash dollars that each would have given him for Granny's account if they only had not been interrupted and disturbed. "I must speak to Mr. Throckmorton about this. He promised faithfully to pull his punches. We'll never get anywhere this way."

Upstairs he looked around upon a fresh crop of wreckage. He was pleased to note that the salesman had left behind a brand-new portable typewriter. The total of all the abandoned belongings would add up to a tidy sum, for he felt quite certain that not one of the owners would dream of coming back to claim them. Nevertheless, he tuned his mind to its most powerful telepathic wave, and his soul softly vibrated:

"Mr. Throckmorton. Oh, Mr. Throckmorton, please."

"Yes, Charles."

The whisper came from smack in the middle of his ear, tingling and buzzing as if a bumblebee had lodged there, and there was a clammy, frigid quality about it that was maddening. It startled Charles more violently than any of his hectic experiences in ruined Haggard Hall. He had the wild impulse to soar straight up like a rocket and out through the roof. But he remembered who and where he was, and the sound counsel contained in the monumental work of Hans Friedrich Schutzner von Oberschutzen "On Handling Obstreperous Ghosts." He got a grip on himself and said very quietly but firmly, "This won't do, Mr. Throckmorton. We must have a little talk."

Out of the conference between carnal and spectral minds came compromise. Subsequently there was a brief transition period during which several desirable changes were made in the routine of the house, and at least one physical addition. After that all was well. Everyone concerned was happy, save perhaps the army of persons who were granted the privilege of spending a few interesting, if not entertaining, hours in Granny's old house.

Granny was happy, though nothing could induce her to go within blocks of her former home again or speak of what befell her the night she so precipitately left it. For her resourceful grandson was doing well by her. He met duly all the notes as they were presented, and one by one he retired the junior mortgages. In addition, he bought her another and smaller place in which to spend her remaining years. She never understood quite why he was succeeding where she had failed, for she herself had been a good manager and her house was never empty. But one gets old, and new brooms sweep clean.

Needless to say, the bank was happy. It got what was due it on the date due, which is all that any bank ever asks. Nor did the OPA have ground for grievance. Its rules were complied with; there were no protests or complaints. The "O" Street house was the least of their worries.

As for Charles—well, Charles was content, too. Granny's house was saved. Every dime of rental he took in went scrupulously into her account. He himself was well heeled, too. Not long after he took charge he found time to open up a small shop dealing in secondhand luggage, clothing, and other personal belongings. It was a very profitable shop, for his main costs were rent and clerk hire. His stock cost him only haulage—from that basement room in the "O" Street house. But his greatest delight was the augmented library dealing with the occult that his profits had enabled him to buy. The possession of that, coupled with daily association with the indefatigable Throckmorton, soon made him the world's outstanding authority on ghostly affairs.

He was often tempted to join the ranks of the great by writing an authoritative work himself. It would be nice to see his volumes on library shelves. But then, whenever he considered the revelations he would have to make, and when

he looked at the growing bank balances under his control, he would put the doing of it off. Much as he would have relished seeing his name in golden letters on a book cover, he also was aware that the number of persons who shared his limited interest were small. It would not do to ignore the old fable and kill the goose that laid the golden eggs.

For he had composed a lesser piece of writing, which, while not literature nor dignified by the aura of scientific pretension, was paying him daily royalties far and above what he could hope to obtain by exposing his secret to the world. Not that all of this lesser composition was secret. Far from it. Only half. The other half was posted frankly and boldly on the wall beside his desk in the vestibule of the "O" Street house. It hung beside the price schedules for the establishment nailed to the wall by a minion of the OPA. It read:

WARNING!

This house is reputed to be haunted.

THEREFORE:

In self-protection it must insist upon compliance with the following house rules.

1. Each prospective tenant must sign a release to the management against any future claim for loss of property or acute mental distress due to allegedly spectral depredations.
2. All rentals must be paid weekly in advance.
3. No rentals will be refunded for any reason.
4. Rooms abandoned without notice to the management will be at once rerented.
5. Property left unclaimed by departing tenants will be sold for storage charges after thirty days.

Those rules sewed up the tenant. Not that any departed one of them had ever shown up again to claim his property or ask a refund of what he had paid. But, as Charles put it to Mr. Throckmorton's faithful shade, "just in case."

The unpublicized other half of Charles' small but effective brochure was posted elsewhere—pasted face to the wall in the back of a tiny closet in the attic where the phantasmal self of the ex-Mr. Throckmorton rested during his leisure hours. They were for his personal guidance and the more orderly conduct of the business of the house. They were short and to the point.

HAUNTING REGULATIONS

1. Be moderate always. It would be awkward if a departing guest should develop a major psychosis. Not too much heat!
2. Never put the pressure on until the guest's baggage has been delivered. It is a valuable by-product.
3. No rotten odors when the inspectors of the Health Department are around.
4. Complete fade-out whenever a prowl squad of the Psychic Research Bureau is on the premises.
5. The bathrooms are the preferred spots for staging manifestations. I had that old-fashioned spiral, sliding chute-type fire escape installed for just that reason. The dissatisfied tenant has a quick and easy way out with a ready exit over the back fence. If you stick to that procedure the incoming tenants will not be disturbed by the departing ones.

Yes, everybody was happy. Even the Throckmorton ghost. He grumbled a bit at first, to be sure, but he soon accepted the new regime. He complained that the full scope of his artistry was denied him, but was answered with the pointed reminder that what he lacked in quality he was more than compensated for in quantity. The house had a capacity of three dozen occupants, and while the native Washingtonians quickly learned to shun the place, each new train that rolled into Union Station brought fresh loads of prospects. Boys distributing handbills tipped them off that in Washington there was at least one place where a "few" vacancies might be had—if one hurried. And, as the venerable Throckmorton knew, after his long exile in desolate Haggard House, thirty-six fresh and gullible victims a day is nothing to be sneezed at. That each was compelled to pay the full—controlled—weekly rental was neither here nor there. That part was his partner's payoff. It was give and take.

"Ho-hum," yawned Charles, as he appraised the resale value of the leavings of the night before. "Not bad, not bad." No matter how many came and went, there were always more to come. He skimmed through a packet of letters and glanced at some intriguing photographs. He often stumbled onto such items as those—infinitely valuable if offered discreetly to the right market. Only twice did he find anything the F. B. I. was acutely interested in. But he had no use for more personal items. To offer them for sale would have seemed to him dishonorable, smacking of treachery and blackmail. For Charles was a boy of high sense of honor. His business methods, while unique, were strictly on the up-and-up. It was no fault of his that people went on ignoring the marvelous literature on the subject of phantoms and the art of haunting. If they chose to persist in *not* believing in ghosts—well, that was their hard luck.

THE END.

THE GOLDEN AGE

By Elmer Ransom

● An elixir of immortality, a potion that would make one forever remain at whatever age he had attained when he drank it. But—what is the perfect age, the age to freeze forever?

A human question mark, Dr. Henry Smith; young without the elasticity of youth, he came to us out of obscurity and did nothing to enlighten our tight and curious South Carolina countryside as to his past. Small and gray of face, he always wore gray English tweeds of a winter and white linens, come summer. He had a great shock of unbarbered sandy hair, never covered by a hat.

Only once had I seen him take the slightest interest in any community matter, and that was when he surprised the local branch of some peace society by donating a hundred dollars when they appealed for funds.

"I have seen war," he explained in his stilted fashion. "I hate it. It interrupts the tapestry of so many lives. Every man should have the privilege of living out his span of years—living them out if nothing more. Man has a right to old age, a right to the dignity of a seemly death."

"Henry!"

The word was a sharply spoken warning from his wife who stood on the threshold of the doctor's undistinguished office. A look passed between them, and she turned and smiled at me; a tired, age-old smile which involved only her rather wistful mouth. Mary Smith wore a spotted laboratory apron that gave off the faint odor of antiseptics. Her black hair was drawn back severely from her shiny forehead. What a pity that Henry Smith should have married a woman so utterly indifferent to all possible feminine appeal. She was a technician, and a dowdy one at that, not a wife.

"He is impulsive, parson," she explained. "What could he know of war?"

She switched on the center light for us. "Dr. Harper wishes to see you, dear." The voice was tired, flat.

Dr. Harper's ample frame filled the doorway. His heavy, sensual face was moist from the rain. Fleshy jowls folded piglike over his soft collar. His eyelids were puffed and the whites of his eyes shot through with tiny red veins. His white hair gave his face an unmerited distinction.

"Please don't go, parson," he said as I rose. "Beastly weather for September."

We didn't get along very well—Harper and I—and possibly my greeting was rather curt. He had something definite on his mind, and he didn't seem to notice.

"I wondered if you would see Bob Jenks for me," Harper said to Dr. Smith.

Since Bob was the amiable young Negro giant who took me fishing Saturday afternoons, I asked what ailed him. He didn't know. Sarah, Bob's wife, had got word to Dr. Harper last night.

"Last night?" Smith asked, frowning.

"Yes, I was busy," he answered indifferently. "Nine miles, and lucky to get three dollars."

"But, doctor," I remonstrated, "he might be seriously ill."

Harper smiled his oily smile. "It's all right for youngsters like Dr. Smith to work for experience, but we older doctors must have something more substantial." He lit a cigar and fogged himself in its heavy smoke. With splendid indifference he said: "That's something I want you to help me with, parson. This young man refuses to send out his bills. People are taking advantage of him."

I said nothing. It was common talk. Smith neither paid nor collected except under pressure. Dressler, the local pharmacist, had shown me Smith's account of several hundred dollars and asked me to speak to him about it. "The Millers owe him enough to settle all of his obligations if he'd only bill them," Dressler had said. "And the doctors here don't like it any more than I do."

The telephone rang and Smith excused himself. Harper leaned confidentially toward me: "This young man is a gift to you from heaven, parson. Straighten him out. He's willing to practice on your Negroes and poor whites for nothing. But he's hurting himself with his lack of business management, and he's hurting the other doctors

here. For his own sake I wish you'd speak to him. He might listen to you."

I had no idea whatever of attending to Smith's business, but fortunately before I could answer the doctor returned. He had on his raincoat and his bag was in his hand.

"That was Sarah," he announced, "calling from Greene's store. She was trying to locate you and said she had four dollars. Would you go with me, doctor?"

"Nine miles, on a night like this! Hardly," Harper answered, rising. "Bob lives on the mail route just before it turns back to Burton. You can find it. And, parson, please remember what I told you. I'm interested in this young fellow."

Harper left. Mrs. Smith entered, dressed against the rain.

"Please, Mary," the doctor said, "I'll be all right and I want you to watch the animal."

Her face reflected a strange terror. "You will be careful?" she asked as though the country ride involved some extreme hazard.

"Please," he answered wearily. "I have told you that you have nothing to fear."

She turned to me: "Won't you drive with him?" I knew where Bob lived and I agreed, mildly irritated at any such stupid anxiety.

We drove in silence until I protested at the speed of his driving. "Time might be of tremendous importance," he explained. "Tremendous."

The storm had increased in violence. Dead limbs carpeted the roadway and trees swayed and creaked ominously in the blackness that pressed in upon us.

"Isn't Bob a young man?" he asked. I assured him that Bob was no more than twenty-five, a prime specimen of a man.

"A young man," he muttered. "A young man. No young man should die." It was an obsession with him. I had heard him say it many times before.

I clutched the door handle: "Why do you think that this young Negro might die?" I asked.

He didn't answer, but I knew that Sarah had alarmed him. We turned off the hard surface into a sand-clay township road. Suddenly a wagon loomed straight ahead. Dr. Smith jerked the car to the left and the wheels skidded sickeningly. I threw my arm against the instrument board and braced myself. We missed the wagon, crashed sideways into a tree, slewed forward with that terrible lurch of a skidding car completely out of control. The two left wheels plowed along

the ditch, until the car pitched entirely over, resting on its top.

I called out to Dr. Smith, but there was no answer. A tiny tongue of flame licked under the hood and the smell of hot metal reached my nostrils. I drove my foot into the door and it flew open. Vague forms appeared in the light of the burning car. Someone grabbed my arm and dragged me out.

"Doc Smith's in there," I shouted.

I tore away, and reaching in the car felt the slumped figure. I tugged at it, but found the upper part of his body wedged between the wheel and the top of the car. The flames spread with incredible rapidity, and yet it seemed hours that I pulled at Smith's body, calling to him. Someone appeared at the other side of the overturned automobile and began to push the unconscious figure. Suddenly it gave and I dragged him across the road. As I did, the flames ran over the upholstering inside the car.

"Quick," a voice urged. "I'll help you, suh."

We carried him down the road for fifty yards before the gasoline tank exploded. The flames leaped into the air with the sound of escaping steam. The rain beat down upon us and the trees complained in the stiffening wind. The colored folks from the wagon stood around waiting for me to direct them.

Smith sat up and felt his head. "What happened?" he asked thickly.

I told him. I urged him to lie still, but he got shakily to his feet. He stared moodily at the car which fast became a twisted mass of glowing metal with a few flames licking out of it here and there.

"So," he said, "again." There was a vast disappointment in the tone, an incomprehensible weariness. He turned to me, his figure drooping and disheveled in the gloom.

"Do you remember what Christ said? 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' Must I be forever crucified for one mistake?"

I was taken aback, hurt. Undoubtedly I had saved the doctor's life and instead of gratitude he met me with bitterness and denunciation. Before I could phrase any fitting answer, he thought of our mission:

"This Bob. How far is it? We must get along. Where is my bag?"

"Your bag burned up," I answered, aware that, but for me, he would have perished with the bag.

The Negroes agreed to take us to Bob's house in the wagon Some regret at his outburst moved him as the mule trudged along in the storm.

"I'm sorry, parson. Possibly some day I can explain myself."

We found Bob's huge frame lumped and shadowy under a ragged quilt. His right leg was drawn up close to his body. He moaned when Dr. Smith forced it gently down, but the Negro was entirely unconscious.

"Rigid," mumbled Dr. Smith, probing the man's abdomen. "We'll get him to town at once. There is no time to lose. None to lose."

"He ain't gwine die, suh?" Sarah asked, terror in her voice.

"Eh," the doctor said. "Die? Not if I can help it. Not a young man. Send for a car."

We carried Bob into the surgery back of Dr. Smith's office. Three small rooms adjoined here. One he used for animal experimentation of some kind. One he had fitted as an operating room. The other contained a single bed. Dr. Smith used it mainly for emergencies such as the present one. A crude arrangement, of course, a small-town compromise, the best that could be done.

Mrs. Smith's eyes flashed that strange terror I had seen in them before. "An accident," Dr. Smith said. "No time to explain now. We'll have to scrub up. You must give the anæsthetic. I'll want a leucocyte count first."

Neither the doctor nor his wife paid the slightest attention to me. Inside of an hour Dr. Smith was ready to operate and I went into the outer office. Sarah sat huddled in the corner, frightened and distraught, the whites of her eyes like great agates against her black skin. I could distinguish the occasional impatient demand for forceps or sponges, followed by the light footsteps of Mary Smith. The odor of ether sickened the air.

Twenty minutes passed. Then the door opened. I hope I never shall see again such a look as I saw on the face of Dr. Henry Smith. The feverish light had died out of his eyes. They were flat, dead-gray. The blue welt on his forehead, relic of our accident, stood out against a gray face. His nostrils expanded and contracted under hard breathing like a man suffering with asthma. His hands were clenched, bloodless.

"I made a mistake," he murmured, "a terrible mistake." He looked at me and all the tragedy of his life which I was so soon to learn stared out of tortured eyes. "Bob is dead," he said flatly. "I killed him."

Sarah stood up, swayed; then she began to shout as only a Negress can shout in the presence of unexpected death. It was horrible, unendurable.

"Stop it," I ordered.

Sarah retreated before me and, turning, dashed from the room.

"An aneurysm of the abdominal aorta," Smith said. "I missed it. I didn't ask for a history. I didn't use my head. Oh, God, how many men have I killed! How many young men who should live out their lives!"

My heart overflowed with pity for this young doctor, so obviously in the depths of despair. I

told him that he had done his best, done it without any hope of reward of any kind. Bob would have died, anyway, without his help. I mumbled all the numberless platitudes a minister musters for such an emergency.

"You don't understand," he said bitterly. "I am condemned to go on and on making the same blunders. I can never grow up."

The words seemed melodramatic then, but I was soon to learn that they were strangely, bitterly true. Henry Smith, I believe, suffered more than any man who has ever lived.

The next morning Dr. Henry Smith informed me that he was leaving our little town.

"No," I objected at once. "Suppose you did make a mistake—do you think that other doctors never make them? We need you."

"It is nice here," Dr. Smith agreed. "Nicer than anywhere I've ever lived. I would like to grow old in such a place." His voice was wistful when he added: "But you will understand soon that I can never stay in any place for very long." Queer words from a man of his age who had been with us for seven years.

"I'm called away. I shall be gone for several weeks. When I return, I'll get my instruments and close my office. While I'm away you must do something for me. You will promise, now, that whatever you think, whatever I tell you, you will keep it inviolable"—he paused—"during my lifetime."

"I would not betray you."

"Henry!" Again that single sharp warning from Mary Smith.

"Please, Mary, you insist on going with me. There is no other way."

He led me past her into the small room which he used for animal experimentation. It was cluttered with the usual paraphernalia of the scientist. Dr. Smith lifted a nondescript puppy from a box and fed it with a medicine dropper. The dog took the mixture with the obvious greedy enjoyment of any healthy, young animal.

I would have guessed that the dog was less than a week old, its eyes not yet open. After feeding, and still without explanation, he sterilized a hypodermic, took a vial from his electric refrigerator, filled the tube of the syringe and inserted the needle deftly under the animal's skin without apparently causing any pain at all. When he replaced the puppy in its box he turned to me.

"My revelation begins here," he said. "Don't think that I wish to make a mystery for you, but I must. Please promise me that you will watch this puppy carefully while I am away."

Mystified and feeling a little sick, I agreed.

"The procedure is quite simple," he explained. "I have standardized the formula and the puppy will thrive on four feedings a day. On what happens to this puppy depends the lives and happiness of three people. You won't fail me?"

"I won't fail you."

"In case the weather turns cold, the room must be heated. You will attend to that?"

I nodded.

"Then that is all for the present," he said, obviously relieved that I had pressed no questions of my own. He pulled out his handkerchief. A telegram fell from his pocket. He stood undecided a moment. "Read it," he said. The message read:

I CAN'T GO ON. UNLESS YOU CAN DO SOMETHING, I AM CHECKING OUT.

RALPH.

I handed it to him. "That," he said, "is from one of the three."

Dr. Smith and his wife left town the next morning, and I took up the mysterious nursing of a week-old puppy, feeling very much as though I had lent myself to some satanic witchery. This feeling increased as the weeks passed and—as you have doubtless guessed—the puppy did not change in any way. It gobbled its milk, slept, whined and cried at times as young dogs will, but it showed no evidence of increasing maturity. In some cruel fashion, Dr. Smith had arrested the development of the animal.

I didn't like it. I didn't like it at all, and I was happy one evening when Dr. Smith and his wife walked in on me while I was at the monotonous task of supplying that insatiable young appetite.

"Parson, how are you?"

I turned to answer, and saw that neither Dr. Smith nor his wife really saw me. They stared down at the dog.

"Its eyes?" Mary Smith almost gasped.

"They are not open— Oh, my God, Mary."

"It is no use." Her voice was weary, hopeless.

"You mustn't say that," he said. Her face was twisted, despairing. She walked blindly out of the room.

Dr. Smith asked: "What do you think of me?"

"I don't know," I answered, perplexed. "I am waiting." I dropped into a chair, and he sat opposite me.

"I'm going to tell you the whole story," he began. "That puppy is eleven months old. It will live just as it is until some accident or disease takes it off. It will not age a day or an hour. Once the vaccine is in the blood stream the whole mechanism of maturation stops."

I stared at him, unbelieving, only half comprehending the import of his words, not understanding that the injection I had seen him give the puppy was an effort to counteract this strange vaccine of which he spoke.

"I was born at Berkeley in Gloucestershire, Eng-

land, on January 1, 1773. I have been living for one hundred and sixty-six years, but I am only twenty-eight years old."

The first shock passed. The man was insane.

"Don't excite yourself, Dr. Smith." I tried to smile. "You are much too old to risk it." His face changed instantly and I hurried on:

"Dr. Francis Merton, of Baltimore, is a close friend of mine. I should like for him to see you."

"Merton. Oh, yes, the psychiatrist. I treated him fifty years ago when he was a boy. Does he still have the curious trick of twisting the left side of his face?"

I persisted: "He has done wonders with overwrought nerves."

Smith smiled, his dead, humorless smile: "You don't believe me, parson, but you will before I am through. I don't need a psychiatrist."

He took off his coat and, rolling up the sleeve of his shirt, bared his left arm. A deep, ugly scar scored it almost from the shoulder to the elbow.

"I was one of the first persons to be vaccinated for smallpox. This vaccination was given to me by Dr. Edward Jenner in 1795. You know, of course, the history of Jenner's great experiments?"

I nodded and he went on after replacing his coat:

"These experiments came long before Lister's work on antiseptic and asceptic surgery. They preceded, too, Pasteur's remarkable contributions which were the real beginning of the germ theory of disease. Jenner's contribution is all the more spectacular because of this. He worked empirically, but he was wise before his time. He stamped smallpox out of Europe without knowing the cause of the disease.

"The work fired my youthful imagination. If it could be done with smallpox, why couldn't it be accomplished for that unconquerable malady of the human race—old age? If one disease could be conquered, why not another?

"I conceived the idea that man was born with the essence of death in his veins. That essence worked to bring him from infancy to childhood, to adolescence, youth, and last to old age.

"If some vaccine could be developed that would halt this process, then I would have discovered the principle of perpetual youth."

He paused and for a moment his face lit up. "At least I was centuries ahead of my contemporaries who scoffed at my crude laboratory. The idea obsessed me. I gave up all practice. Days and nights I worked. There is a hand-written manuscript in a London museum today which describes me under another name as consorting with the devil.

"Three years after the beginning of my experiments I discovered what I was seeking. It came, as such things so often do, by chance. The vaccination of a young puppy stopped his development at once. I then vaccinated myself." He passed his hand over his face. His voice shook. "Later I vaccinated Mary.

"Of course, it was crude. In giving it to some hardy cronies, who were willing to take the risk for the sake of eternal youth, I infected them. A few died. I was forced out of England. I came to America in 1810. Since, barring accident or disease, I would live forever, I could bide my time.

"Life was to be for Mary and me a measured and stately thing. Youth and health and vigor were forever ours. We would work carefully, confide in no one, give our vaccine only to those great souls who would pick humanity up out of the welter of its ignorance.

"But we neglected one item. If maturation is stopped, it is stopped just as a clock is stopped at a certain hour. One lives on, but one does not progress. The very brain cells are frozen in their grooves. Beyond a certain point we could never go. I attended another medical school, learning all that was new."

"I have earned, I think, twelve medical diplomas. I have served as many internships. Always I am a brilliant student. Why shouldn't I be? Always I am offered a junior's place with some great man."

He looked at me owlishly: "Your friend, Dr. Francis Merton, offered me one, not recognizing in this ambitious young medico the doctor who had treated him successfully for chorea when he was a child."

He paused and I found myself leaning forward, almost holding my breath. I was just forty, in the full vigor of my manhood. If I might overcome the toll which the next few years would take, I could carry my word and my mission on and on and on.

No age before had so intrigued me as these present years. The first flush of irresponsible youth was behind me. I had maturity of judgment, knowledge of people. The blood surged through my veins at the idea. And then I thought how foolish I was. This man was crazy, insane.

"What is this organism that causes us to age?" I asked.

"I have never isolated it," he answered. "I know only how to combat it, how to make the animal mechanism build up antibodies to it."

My voice was not quite steady: "You mean that if you vaccinated me, I would in all respects remain forty years of age."

His eyes were queer now: "Vaccination isn't quite the word. I have improved the technique. Five cubic centimeters of the vaccine injected by hypodermic will absolutely stop the aging process in a man, and nothing that I have been able to discover will start it again."

I thought of the puppy that I had wet-nursed for thirty days, lying there with its eyes still

closed. My mind raced back to Smith's disregard for his obligations, his indifference to money that others owed him, his passion that men should live out their lives, that young men shouldn't die, to a hundred small remarks that now took on a new and strange meaning. I remembered him as he had come to us. I saw him now. He certainly had not matured in those seven years. This thing was incredible, and yet it might be true.

If life were so wearisome to him it was because he had stopped it too soon. As well stop it at twenty-eight days as twenty-eight years. There was little difference between the greedy infant, content with its mother's breast and the warm comfort of a crib, and the advanced adolescence of twenty-eight. Life could have no real savor. Twenty-eight was reckless, adventurous, radical, thoughtless, but not satisfying. The very animal passions of a man of twenty-eight are so ill directed as to make it impossible for him to appreciate their real meaning, their possible beauty. He couldn't know food, music, literature, art or life at twenty-eight.

But, ah, forty, that was the golden period. At forty a man held the respect and devotion of his contemporaries. He had background. He had begun to live. Dr. Smith watched me curiously, trying I think to penetrate the emotions that must have chased themselves over my face.

He misinterpreted them: "You wonder why, if I am ill of life, I lack the courage to end it?" I shook my head in disagreement, but he went on wistfully: "I see other men mature, see them get the full meaning of life. I want it. You see, whenever I die, I must die a young man unless I can discover some means of counteracting the vaccine.

"Yet it must come through some fortuitous chance, for a man of twenty-eight is not prepared for research. The very lack of maturity which I embraced defeats me.

"Moreover," he continued, "there are Ralph and Mary, both as desperate as I. Others to whom it was given have died through war or accident or disease. One committed suicide. All, people who had never lived fully because, regardless of years, when a man dies before his time he has not lived out his life. There was a child—Mary's child and mine— But never mind that." His voice was low, desperate. "This story is grim enough as it is. I can't leave Mary and Ralph to such tragedy so long as I have any hope of success."

I continued to eye him without speaking, and he shifted restlessly and asked me:

"You are still doubtful?"

Carefully I guarded my voice, made it indifferent.

"Doubtful enough," I answered smiling, "to be willing to refute your theory by taking your vaccine."

For a minute he didn't answer. Then he said bitterly: "So, parson, you are like all the rest. You, too, seek the fountain of youth. Where is your philosophy?"

"I simply do not believe that what you say is true," I answered stiffly.

"Possibly not," he replied, "but you hope that it is true. Well, parson, it is, but I have not given the vaccine to a human being for seventy years. I will never give it again. You don't realize what a perpetual hell you ask for."

He rose: "And now I'm tired." Some profound disappointment and dejection gripped him. "I had hoped," he said, "that you could help me."

I did not believe his bizarre story. Of course not. I would not be so stupid. Yet I hurried to a telephone.

It took me an hour to get Dr. Francis Merton in Baltimore. My first words must have startled him for he asked me sharply if I were ill. He would come down if I needed him. No, I was not ill, I answered with some irritation. I wanted to check up some facts for historical and biographical purposes. I realize now that I must have sounded quite beside myself.

He did remember a young country doctor out of Wilmington, Delaware, who had treated him as a boy for chorea, but he couldn't see what interest I had in the matter. It had been all of fifty years ago. Smith or Brown or Jones was the doctor's name, he thought. A colorless, sandy-haired youth with flat gray eyes who always wore gray English tweeds, married to a mousy, black-

haired wife, but he knew his stuff. Then Dr. Merton chuckled:

"I remember so well because he never sent my father a bill, and they finally ran him out of the county because he never paid one."

When I hung up the telephone I shook like a man in the grip of malaria.

My hand tightened on the key to Dr. Smith's office. At two o'clock that morning I returned. Once inside, I pinned black cloths over the windows. Then systematically I searched for the record which he must have kept. I found it after not more than half an hour—a small, Manila-covered book.

The record began more than twenty years before. The puppy which I had fed was No. 24. The book included a diary comment, the amount of vaccine given, and the technical data on the serums concocted in an effort to counteract the vaccine.

I read: "October 19, 1938—Animal No. 24, age six days. Gave one cc. O. A. V. from Lot X 22." On October 31st the record reported the eyes still closed. "November 15th I tried R. V. 104, two cc. December 1st, unchanged. (Will I never succeed!)" The last entry on the animal was September 15, 1939. It read: "Two cc R. V. 105. I must see Ralph. Someone must care for 24. Have determined to confide in the parson."

It was easy to see that O. A. V. referred to old age vaccine, given to the young puppy to stop maturation. The other vaccines referred to the effort to reclaim the dog, and I mentally tagged this as reclamation vaccine. It was the O. A. V. that I sought.

I found it readily enough in the electric refrigerator with the other vaccines, but before I could sterilize a hypodermic I heard a car stop back of the office. I turned out the lights, snatched the cloths from the windows and slipped cautiously out of the front door. Dawn was just coming when I let myself into my own house. I placed my precious package far back in the ice-box and went to my room.

I cannot properly describe my exhilaration as I lay in bed, tossing from side to side, visioning the long stretch of the future. The vial contained not more than five cubic centimeters and I alone could take it.

At eight o'clock the front-door knocker sounded. A few moments later my wife entered my room. I turned over, feigning the drowsiness of recent wakening, and she put her hand gently on my head.

"It is Dr. and Mrs. Smith," she said. "They seem troubled."

I met them in my study. A stranger was with them and Dr. Smith introduced him as Ralph Jones. Jones appeared to be a man of about sixty, dressed as colorlessly as Dr. Smith and with the same dead look in his eyes.

My wife excused herself to see about breakfast. Dr. Smith told me that they were leaving in a few minutes; they wanted to say good-by. They cherished my friendship. Would I please forget all that he had told me. Of course I would, and added fatuously that I still wished that he would see Dr. Merton.

"Dr. Merton can't help us," he said.

The air was strained, unreal. I wanted to be rid of these people who had failed to take advantage of the boon Henry Smith had conferred. The utter stupidity of their hopelessness irritated me. But they wouldn't leave, and the demands of hospitality made me simulate politeness.

I said something about a sermon. It was rude, but the strain was telling on me. I must get this fluid into my veins before these dead-live people talked me out of it.

Jones engaged me in conversation. I do not know to this day all that he said. It returns to me only in snatches.

"What is there in life for a man who can live for several lifetimes?" he asked. "His contemporaries pass; there is no competition; no real reason to surge ahead. You are a young man with ambition and energy. Your work grips you. It seems important. But if you had continuous life there would be too much time."

Never had I heard a more stupid statement. I agreed to it, however. Anything to be rid of them.

"Last week I buried my youngest son," he went on. "He died at eighty-two, surrounded by his children, rich in his accomplishments and his memories. Me," he added bitterly, "no matter how long I live, I can never know what it is to be eighty."

Absurd to wish to be eighty. Forty was the golden age.

Mary Smith pointed to an ancient live oak that spread its benediction over almost half an acre of lawn.

"Was that tree more lovely as an ugly sapling?" she asked. "I want nothing so much as to be a nice old lady with white hair, with grandchildren."

I was relieved when Dr. Smith joined us. His eyes sparkled with some of the rare vivacity which a puzzling case sometimes brought to them. I loved him at such times. Yes, he was going away. No—he smiled a real smile—he couldn't promise to keep in touch. Then they were gone and my wife called me to breakfast.

Nothing was wrong, I assured her with some irritation. I fidgeted for two hours until she left to attend a meeting of the library board. Then, excitement surging through me, I started for the refrigerator where I had placed the vaccine.

Again the knocker sounded. Dr. Harper stood

at the door. I did not ask him in, only stared at him coldly. He was so very unimportant.

"I understand Dr. Smith has left town," he said. "I'm rather sorry." He paused awkwardly. "Possibly I gossiped too much. You know how it is with us old fellows. Smith helped me out with my difficult cases. When you write him, I'd like for you to ask him to come back. It is going to be bad without any sort of hospital or surgery."

I stared rudely at the man. Then I stammered a few words. I think I told him that Dr. Smith expected to return. I'm not sure. Dressler, the druggist, drove up. He took no notice of Dr. Harper.

"You've heard, parson?" he asked.

"Heard?"

"Yes, about Dr. Smith."

He read the blank look on my face.

"He was drowned when his car crashed through the drawbridge barrier. Mrs. Smith was driving. There was a stranger with them."

I grabbed his arm.

"Drowned?"

"Yes, the car has been pulled out of the river. The three of them were drowned. And," he added, "there was a puppy in the car—a young puppy with his eyes not yet open."

The blow staggered me. I sat numbed for thirty minutes after Harper and Dressler had gone. Thirty minutes before I thought of my precious bottle—the last of its kind on earth, the last probably that would ever be on earth, and I was its sole possessor. I went to the icebox, removed the milk and water bottles with which I had screened it. Then my heart almost stopped.

Around the bottle was a small slip of paper held on by a rubber band. Trembling, I took it off and read from a prescription blank of Dr. Smith's.

No, parson. You will not be on my conscience, too. Live out your life as it should be lived.

The vial was empty. Then I remembered Dr. Smith's absence while I talked with Mary Smith and Ralph Jones. I remembered the glint in his eyes when he had returned and I knew that my last chance was gone.

That was thirty years ago, in 1939. Tonight, in the autumn of 1969, I am seventy years old and I know that seventy is the age at which such a serum if ever rediscovered should be given. Seventy gives a man poise and experience. The silly, youthful flush of ambition has passed. Life has ripened as wine ripens in the cask. Philosophy and belief replace the gnawing agnosticism of younger years. Yes, it is the Indian Summer that is really beautiful. Dr. Henry Smith should not have destroyed his magic potion. He should have advised me to keep it until now.

THE END.

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THE WALL

By Robert Arthur

● **It was a lovely bit of mural painting the imprisoned artist contributed to Death Row. It also had its uses—**

The first time I visited John Douglas at the penitentiary, after the higher court had upheld his conviction, I took with me a package of oil paints and brushes. He had requested them through the warden, who gave permission for him to receive them. The paints were compounded according to Douglas' own recipes by an old German with a tiny artists' supply shop tucked away in a Village hole-in-the-wall, and he had written that he was most anxious for them.

The paints and brushes having been examined in the prison office, a guard led me to Douglas' cell, through an interminable series of iron doors. He was in a cell at the far end of the little section reserved for the doomed, and when I stopped in front of the barred door I saw that he was already engaged in painting a mural of some sort on the concrete wall.

He had sketched in the outline of what seemed to be a section of stone wall made up of great chunks of granite, and was so absorbed in his work that for a moment he was unaware of me. Then he turned, saw us, and put down the brush.

"Hello, Henry," he greeted me, with characteristic booming heartiness. "You've brought them? Good!"

The guard let me into the cell and carefully locked the door behind me. Then he took his post where he could watch each move we made. The procedure wasn't quite usual, but, then, neither was it usual for a condemned man to be allowed painting materials.

Douglas took the paints and brushes, glanced at them with satisfaction, then put them aside.

"Sit down, Henry," he invited, indicating his narrow bunk. "Use the couch. I'll sit here on the floor, so that Jones, outside, can be sure nothing but words passes between us."

He sat down on the concrete, cross-legged like a Yogi, folded his arms and beamed at me, his blue eyes bright.

"This is a wonderful posture for concentrating, Henry," he told me. "I learned it in Tibet two years ago. Try it sometime when you have a tough case to prepare for. Also it's quite convenient when the accommodations don't include

chairs. Tell me," he changed the subject, "did Schultz make up the paints just as I specified?"

"He said he did," I answered, a little annoyed at his cheerfulness. It was scarcely the mood I'd expected to find him in, considering that he was due to be electrocuted within thirty days, unless I could win a stay or commutation from the governor—which was problematical. "He said some of the ingredients were difficult to find, but he got them. And he asked what kind of picture you're going to paint, anyway."

John Douglas laughed. He was a big man, fair-haired, with bronzed skin and a great chest from which laughter rolled in a manner impossible to ordinary men.

"My own kind, of course," he said. He waved a hand toward the preliminary sketch he'd done on the wall. "At present, a little something to enliven the rather Spartan simplicity of my suite."

"I don't see how you got the warden to agree," I told him, curious. "It's not exactly customary to extend such facilities to the inmates, you know."

John Douglas chuckled, deep in his throat.

"I blackmailed him," he stated. "I told him I'd commit suicide if he didn't let me have them, but if he did I'd promise on my honor to make no trouble and not to attempt to injure myself in any way.

"He was skeptical at first, pointing out that the precautions here against suicide are rather effective. So I gave him a demonstration. I swallowed my tongue—another useful little trick I learned in Tibet—and almost choked to death before the prison doctor could reach me. After that the warden agreed to take my word of honor. Besides, he seems to have become interested in art since I arrived. Not at all a bad chap."

I snorted, and brought up the matter on which I had really come—the preparation of an appeal to the governor for commutation of the sentence. But Douglas seemed hardly interested, even when I told him how slim the odds were of being able to save him from the electric chair.

"Try it if you want to," he told me, waving a hand negligently. "Don't bother me with the details any more than you have to, though. I really have a very interesting piece of work outlined here, and I've got to have it finished before the thirtieth."

I was thinking that the thirtieth was the day set for his execution as he stretched out a long arm and picked up a square of cardboard leaning against the wall.

It was ordinary cardboard, two by three feet perhaps, and on it Douglas had made a sketch in colored pencil. I recognized it as a working sketch from which he was painting the "mural" he had started on the cell wall.

The cardboard sketch showed a long section of stone wall, made up of huge granite blocks, in the center of which was an arch and a massive double doorway of oak, iron-studded. The two halves of the door were open, swung outward on their hinges, to reveal a scene beyond the wall that Douglas had only indicated as yet. I could see a fountain, sending a spray of water high into the air, and beneath it a pool.

All the rest was vague, merely sketched-in lines, save for the girl standing just inside the open doors, looking outward. She was a tall, slim girl with masses of dark hair falling about her shoulders, a circlet of leaves about her forehead. She wore a gossamer-light gown that was blowing in the wind, molding itself against her body, and stood with one hand upraised, touching the door, the other on her breast at the base of her throat.

She was smiling at us—a little smile, shy and inviting at the same time.

"The same girl!" I said involuntarily, and Douglas chuckled.

"The one that Helen made such a fuss about?" he asked. "Yes, it's the same one. Well, if that's all Henry, I'd like to get back to work. I appreciate your coming and bringing the paints, and give you full authority to do anything you think best. I want you to feel satisfied that you tried.

"But, honestly, I don't think there's any use. The evidence against me is apparently conclusive to everyone but you, although the only thing I did was to try to save Helen by grabbing her before she could fall over that rail. Chance is a greater master of irony than even Bernard Shaw. However, let's not bemoan. I'll look forward to seeing you again—when? Next week? Fine. And listen. Find out for me the date of the full moon this month, will you?"

With that I left, since he obviously wanted me to go, the whole interview having been highly unsatisfactory.

All the way back to town I puzzled over his attitude, which from the very beginning had been that of a man quite uninterested in the outcome of his trial.

I didn't believe that John Douglas had killed his wife Helen, although everyone else, including the jury, did. I was sure his story was the truth. He had said that Helen had come to his studio, which was separate from their apartment, had violently accused him of misconduct with a model, had slashed several recently completed pictures with a knife, and had wound up by going into an hysterical, screaming rage.

Lest she damage more of his work, he had caught her wrists and forced her out of the studio as gently as possible. But in the hall she had broken free from him with a violent movement

that had thrown her against, and over, the rail around the stair well.

He had grabbed her then, to save her. With one hand he had caught her by the neck and shoulders. The other she had clawed at, trying to pull herself back. But his effort had been unsuccessful. She had fallen, screaming, over the rail. As the stairs were circular, and went down for five flights, she had fallen the whole distance and been killed.

But the marks of his fingers had been on her neck and shoulder, his wrists had been scratched and torn by her nails as if in a struggle—and the building superintendent, attracted by her cries, had come out into the hall just in time to see him apparently thrusting her over the rail as she struggled against him.

It was a convincing case against him, and he had done nothing to make it better. He had told his story briefly, almost boredly, with a take-it-or-leave-it air, and had made no effort to conceal his contempt for the mentalities of the prosecutor, the jurymen and even the judge.

The prosecution had made much of the fact of his wife's accusation that he was having an affair with a model. They had been unable to prove the charge, or to produce the model, and I managed to keep mention of it in the official testimony to a minimum. But it had its effect on the jury.

About a year before his wife's death, John Douglas had returned from a six months' wandering through Tibet. Unexpectedly abandoning the competent portrait and landscape work that he had done for years and earned a highly satisfactory income thereby, he had begun a startling series of nudes and seminudes in imaginative settings.

Always the chief figures in the canvases had been the same girl. Tall, slender, with dark hair; a grave, oval face with thoughtful eyes veiled by long lashes; a body that was not voluptuous and not girlish, yet partook of both those qualities; amazingly lovely but with a definite quality of not belonging in this world.

The settings had been as intriguing to professional artists as the figures. Backgrounds of fantastic lakes, streams, the shore of a turbulent purple sea; green dells, fountains, pools where fauns and satyrs bathed. The best known of the pictures, the one that the papers had chosen to reproduce most during the trial, showed the girl who appeared in all the canvases petting a unicorn on the bank of a violet stream.

The pictures were unorthodox, and the dealers had been shy of handling them, calling them old-fashioned rococo in which the public was not interested. Heedless of the instant falling off of his income, John Douglas had turned a deaf ear to their criticisms and gone ahead with absorbed interest in his new field.

Part of Helen Douglas' smoldering rage, that had finally broken out so tragically, had been due to the diminishment of Douglas' income. The rest had been jealousy of the tall, lovely girl he was so constantly depicting.

Helen Douglas was beautiful, too—a tall, blond, crisp beauty which concealed a knifelike sharpness. She had been John Douglas' model, and he had married her—quickly losing interest in her, however, when the limitations of her character made themselves plain. But even when he was infatuated with her, he had never painted her so glowingly alive as he did the unknown girl of his last canvases.

Her suspicions, perhaps, were only natural. It was well known that, in the past at least, John Douglas had always used a model for figure work. He was not an "imagination" painter.

But no one ever saw the model come or go from the studio. The closest thing to substantiating evidence that she actually existed came from the superintendent of the building, the same who had actually seen Helen Douglas' fall. He testified to hearing voices, Douglas' and a woman's, murmuring in the studio, always after dark and particularly on the nights of the full moon. Sometimes, he testified, he heard music and laughter, and occasionally the sound of a woman singing.

I tried to force an admission from him that what he had heard might have been a radio, but failed. He was an Italian, he knew a little of music, and he persisted that it was not a radio. The music was always that of stringed instruments, he stated. And the singing was in a language he did not know.

John Douglas' testimony concerning these matters on direct questioning was damaging to himself in the extreme, and I was helpless to better matters because he did not seem to care what the jury thought. Although denying that he had in any way misconducted himself, he admitted that he always worked from a model, and that he had had a model for the pictures in question. Not only that, he added, but every other figure in them had been painted from living models, too—nymphs, satyrs, fauns, unicorn and all.

And where, the prosecutor asked with heavy irony, had he gone to find these unique models? Douglas had only waved his hand airily, remarking that he had not found it necessary to go anywhere—he had only had to look. With, he added, the proper kind of vision.

I might have entered a plea of insanity, and his testimony would have supported it. But Douglas himself refused to let me do this. And it was as much because the judge and jury felt that he was mocking their intelligence, I think, as to punish him for murder that he was found guilty and sentenced to death.

When the verdict was brought in, he only shrugged.

Douglas still refused to let me raise the issue of insanity, and my appeal was of no avail. The higher court reaffirmed the conviction. John Douglas was sentenced to death by electrocution before midnight of the thirtieth day of that month. And the governor, after I had exhausted all my arguments, refused to grant a stay or commute the sentence.

It took a couple of weeks to reach a final dead end in my efforts, but by the time I made my second trip up to see John Douglas, I knew well enough what the outcome was going to be. He did not, however, seem ruffled when I told him bluntly that there was little use in hoping.

"Hope?" he said, raising his brows at me. "I don't bother with hope, Henry. I prefer action. By the way, did you remember to look up for me the date of the full moon?"

I told him the twenty-ninth. He nodded with satisfaction.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Now let's talk about something else. How do you like my *chef d'oeuvre?*"

He gestured toward the side wall of the cell. It was now almost covered with the painting he was making. On a larger scale, the mural followed the sketch he had shown me. The stones of the wall were done, and seemed so harsh and three-dimensional that I had to restrain myself from reaching out to touch them. The arch had been painted in, too, and he had begun outlining the massive doors. The background, as seen through the open doors, was still blank.

"It's interesting," I said, acidly, "but is it really worth concentrating all your attention on at a time like this, when you might better be engaged in helping me try to save your life?"

"Oh, definitely," John Douglas assured me airily. "Really I wouldn't trade this for all the other work I've done. It's unfinished, of course, but I assure you it's going to be a remarkable thing by the time I'm through. Pity it will be so inaccessible. I don't suppose many art lovers will be willing to commit murder just to get in for a look at it."

"Well, I'll keep trying," I told him, discouragedly, and got to my feet to leave. "I'll see you again next week. By then I should have the governor's decision."

He did not answer. He was already oblivious of me, working with absorbed attention at a fine bit of detail on one of the great wooden doors.

The following week, when I visited him to report on the final failure of my efforts, he only nodded and did not even put down his brush: Wall, arch and door were finished now, in meticulous detail that showed every splinter in the wood of the doors, every crevice in the stone wall.

The background had been blocked in. The girl in the doorway had not been added yet, but there was a fountain to be seen through the wide-swung doors. In the pool at its base half a dozen nymph-like forms were bathing, and on the far side, a unicorn was drinking. In the extreme background was the suggestion of a golden beach and a purplish sea.

"I know you feel bad, Henry," John Douglas told me, wiping his brow with the sleeve of his prison uniform, and it was as if *he* was trying to console *me*. "I guess I haven't been very cooperative. But then, the life I'd been leading up to the last year was rather dull and disappointing. I'm looking forward to what's ahead now. Truly. I'm really grateful to Helen for falling over that rail and releasing me in this manner. For that's what it amounts to—a release that I know now would have been impossible for me to attain in any other way."

I stared at him.

"If you mean that you look upon this as merely a way to commit suicide without actually having the onus of the act fall upon you," I began, "I can hardly agree with you that—"

"Suicide?" he interrupted me. "Oh no, far from it, Henry. I still have a lot of ability to enjoy life. A *lot* of it," he added, his eyes glinting with amusement. "And work, too." He waved his brush toward the picture that was taking form on the cell wall.

"It's coming along, wouldn't you say?" he asked. "Although not as fast as I'd hoped. There are two guards outside the cell every minute of the day and night, keeping an eye on me, and I find it hard to concentrate properly. But I'll be finished in time. Will I be seeing you next week, Henry?"

I told him that I did not know. That I had other clients to whose affairs I must give some attention, and though I would still keep trying

to prevail upon the governor to grant a stay, I probably would not make the trip up unless I had something definite to report. Although, I added, naturally I would be up to see him before—

"Oh, of course," he boomed, slapping me on the shoulder. "And believe me, Henry, I appreciate your efforts more than, perhaps, I seem to. Do you think you could manage to drop in the evening of the twenty-ninth? I don't believe the warden will make any difficulty—in fact, he's become rather interested in this thing I'm painting—and—well, after that matters will be rather too imminent for comfortable talking."

I agreed that in any case I would visit him on the twenty-ninth, and feeling more distressed than he seemed to, I left him working with concentrated care under the watchful gaze of his guards.

I was, as I had been afraid, unable to pry any further action out of the governor. So I did not see John Douglas the following week—there really was no point in it. On the twenty-ninth I drove up to the prison, taking care that no one knew of my visit lest the reporters trail me and try to extract a last-minute story from me. It was early in the evening, and I ate on the way, arriving at the grim, gray-walled building shortly after dark, with a full moon just rising above the trees.

There was no trouble about seeing Douglas—the warden himself, a small, alert man with an intelligent face, conducted me to his cell.

John Douglas was sitting rather wearily on his bunk, his big body slumped with fatigue, but when the door was unlocked for me he rose alertly.

"Hello, Henry," he said cheerfully. "Hello, warden. Come in, too. I haven't anything private to say, and you might like to inspect the finished work. I put the last touches on only an hour ago. It gives your prison the distinction of being the only one in the world with a masterpiece on its walls. Art lovers from all over the world will be breaking into jail to see it, if you aren't careful."

The warden stepped inside behind me, and the guards locked the door. Within the cell we stood staring mutely at the picture. It was a masterpiece. He was not speaking boastfully. Even my untrained eyes could recognize the living, glowing beauty of the scene.

Apparently the scene was illuminated by moonlight, for the colors were subdued and a curious haziness hung over the whole composition—the sea beach in the background, the high-jetting fountain, the pool, the bathing nereids, the drinking unicorn, the velvet grass. The moonlight haze gave an atmosphere of enchantment to the scene, yet curiously made it more real because the details were not too definite to the eye.

Except for the girl standing in the doorway, smiling at us. She was as she had been in the preliminary sketch, save that I almost expected to hear her speak, almost believed she was about to take a step toward us. A chaplet of bay leaves was about her forehead, and her hair rippled about her shoulders as if stirred by an actual breeze.

"Lord!" It was the little warden. "She she—"

He couldn't find the right words, and neither could I. But I knew what he meant.

Douglas had been watching our faces, and he nodded in satisfaction.

"I hope you won't get into any trouble for letting me paint it, warden," he said with genuine concern. "I—well, I'm afraid there may be questions asked about it afterward."

"I don't care if there are," the warden said crisply. "I'm retiring next month, anyway. And" —he spoke with a curious humbleness—"to be able to see this is worth going through some trouble for."

"Good!" Douglas exclaimed, and picked up from his bunk the preliminary sketch I had seen before. "Henry," he said, "I want to give this to you. I've amplified it, and gone over it in oils. The cardboard isn't much of a material to work on, but go to Schultz. He'll fix it up so it will last as well as canvas. And some day it should be worth a lot, if you want to sell it.

"All right for him to have it, warden?"

"Oh, surely," the little warden agreed, scarcely hearing him. He was frowning at the picture. "It . . . damn it!" he said bewilderedly. "It seems to have changed, somehow!"

"That's the moonlight," John Douglas said blandly. "The moon is rising, of course, so the light is gradually changing. Listen hard, and perhaps you can hear the waves breaking on the beach."

The warden looked at him with quick suspicion. But in the silence of the moment a murmuring filled the cell, like waves on a beach far distant. For just an instant; then one of the guards in the corridor moved with a squeaking of heavy-soled shoes, and the sound was gone.

"Well, Henry," Douglas said then, before the warden could make any comment, "thanks for everything. I appreciate it all from the bottom of my heart. Good-by now. And hang onto that picture. I have a hunch my stuff will start rising soon."

He gripped my hand quickly, let it go, and a moment later, both of us a little bewildered, the warden and I were following a guard down the many corridors leading to the outside.

I didn't see John Douglas again.

Sometime that night, with his execution hardly a dozen hours off, he escaped.

There was a terrific uproar about it, of course, and a legislative inquiry. The warden was forced to resign, though as he had planned to within a few weeks, anyway, it was not a great hardship on him. Especially as he and his men were finally absolved from complicity in the unprecedented escape, and he did not lose his Civil Service pension. Suspicion continued to cling to him, of course; but no one ever explained how John Douglas had gotten out of his death cell, deep in the bowels of the penitentiary, with two guards almost within touching distance of him.

However, sometime after the whole affair had been buried as an unsolved mystery, the former warden stopped in at my office to see me. He had gained a little weight, looked quite cheerful and, curiously, had become an art collector in a small way. He was buying such of John Douglas' later works as he could pick up within the limitations of his purse—they were rising in value by leaps and bounds.

He eyed the sketch Douglas had given me, which hung above my desk, but did not try to persuade me to part with it.

"I thought you might like to know," he said instead, meeting my eyes, "about a couple of details that did not come out in the inquiry. Douglas disappeared from the cell about midnight, at a moment when neither of the guards happened to be looking in at him.

"They said"—he hesitated an instant—"they said that suddenly they heard a sound like waves crashing on a beach, and a gust of warm, flower-scented air blew past them. And when they turned, to look into the cell, Douglas was gone.

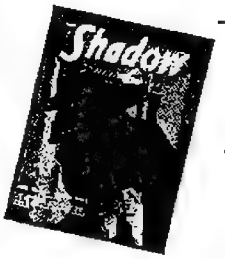
"They called me at once. He was gone, all right, and without leaving any trace as to how he had managed it. But I thought it best to caution them not to mention the sound of waves at the inquiry, or the gust of air, or that the picture, when we entered the empty cell, was not as Douglas had originally painted it. Those doors, that were open—when you and I went in—were closed tightly."

He searched my face, his eyes bright and unblinking.

"Closed tightly," he repeated. "There was nothing to be seen but the wall and the closed doors. That's easy enough to explain, of course. He must have changed the picture after we left. But I didn't say anything about it, because there wasn't any way to explain this."

He took something from an envelope and held it on the palm of his hand for me to see.

"This was on the floor of the cell, just at the foot of the closed doors," he said. "In case you don't recognize it, I had a botanist identify it for me. It's a bay leaf."



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THE HAG SÉLEEN

By Theodore Sturgeon and James H. Beard

Modern adults are too well trained to ignore magic as superstition—it takes a child to handle the matter properly!

Illustrated by Cartier

It was while we were fishing one afternoon, Patty and I, that we first met our friend the River Spider. Patty was my daughter and Anjy's. Tacitly, that is. Figuratively she had originated in some hot corner of hell and had left there with such incredible violence that she had taken half of heaven with her along her trajectory and brought it with her.

I was sprawled in the canoe with the nape of my neck on the conveniently curved cedar stern piece of the canoe, with a book of short stories in my hands and my fish pole tucked under my armpit. The only muscular energy required to fish that way is in moving the eyes from the page to the float and back again, and I'd have been magnificently annoyed if I'd had a bite. Patty was far more honest about it; she was fast asleep in the bilges. The gentlest of currents kept my mooring line just less than taut between the canoe and a half-sunken snag in the middle of the bayou. Louisiana heat and swampland mosquitoes tried casually to annoy me, and casually I ignored them both.

There was a sudden thump on the canoe and I sat upright just as a slimy black something rose out of the muddy depths. It came swiftly until the bow of the canoe rested on it, and then more slowly. My end of the slender craft sank and a small cascade of blood-warm water rushed on, and down, my neck. Patty raised her head with a whimper; if she moved suddenly I knew the canoe would roll over and dump us into the bayou. "Don't move!" I gasped.

She turned puzzled young eyes on me, astonished to find herself looking downward. "Why, daddy?" she asked, and sat up. So the canoe did roll over and it did dump us into the bayou.

I came up strangling, hysterical revulsion numbing my feet and legs where they had plunged into the soft ooze at the bottom. "Patty!" I screamed hoarsely.

She popped up beside me, trod water while she knuckled her eyes. "I thought we wasn't allowed to swim in the bayou, daddy," she said.

I cast about me. Both banks presented gnarled roots buried in rich green swamp growth, and I knew that the mud there was deep and sticky and soft. I knew that that kind of mud clutches and smothers. I knew that wherever we could find a handhold we could also find cottonmouth moccasins. So I knew that we had to get into our canoe again, but fast!

Turning, I saw it, one end sunken, the other high in the air, one thwart fouled in the black tentacles of the thing that had risen under us. It was black and knotted and it dripped slime down on us, and for one freezing second I thought it was alive. It bobbed ever so slowly, sluggishly, in the disturbed water. It was like breathing. But it made no further passes at us. I told Patty to stay where she was and swam over to what I could reach of the canoe and tugged. The spur that held it came away rottenly and the canoe splashed down, gunwale first, and slowly righted itself half full of water. I heard a shriek of insane laughter from somewhere in the swamp but paid no attention. I could attend to that later.

We clung to the gunwales while I tried to think of a way out. Patty kept looking up and down the bayou as if she thought she hadn't enough eyes. "What are you looking for, Patty?"

"Alligators," she said.

Yeah, I mused, that's a thought. We've got to get out of here! I felt as if I were being watched and looked quickly over my shoulder. Before my eyes could focus on it, something ducked behind a bush on the bank. The bush waved its fronds at me in the still air. I looked back at Patty—

"Patty! Look out!"

The twisted black thing that had upset us was coming down, moving faster as it came, and as I shrieked my warning its tangled mass came down on the child. She yelped and went under, fighting the slippery fingers.

I lunged toward her. I screamed. "Pat—"

The bayou bubbled where she had been. I dived,

wrenching at the filthy thing that had caught her. Later—it seemed like minutes later, but it couldn't have been more than five seconds—my frantic hand closed on her arm. I thrust the imprisoning filth back, hauled her free, and we broke surface. Patty, thank Heaven, remained perfectly still with her arms as far around me as they would go. Lord knows what might have happened if she had struggled.

We heard the roar of a bull alligator and that was about all we needed. We struck out for the bank, clawed at it. Fortunately Patty's hands fell on a root, and she scuttled up it like a little wet ape. I wasn't so lucky—it was fetid black mud that I floundered through. We lay gasping, at last on solid ground.

"Mother's gonna be mad," said Patty after a time.

"Mother's going to gnash her teeth and froth at the mouth," I said with a good deal more accuracy. We looked at each other and one of the child's eyes closed in an eloquent wink. "Oh, yeah," I said, "and how did we lose the canoe?"

Patty thought hard. "We were paddling along an' a big fella scared you with a gun and stoled our canoe."

"How you talk! I wouldn't be scared!"

"Oh, *yes* you would," she said with conviction.

I repressed an unpaternal impulse to throw her back into the bayou. "That won't do. Mother would be afraid to have a man with a gun stompin' around the bayou. Here it is. We saw some

flowers and got out to pick them for mother. When we came back we found the canoe had drifted out into the bayou, and we knew she wouldn't want us to swim after it, so we walked home."

She entered into it with a will.

wasn't it?" she asked.

"Sure was," I said. "Now get those dungarees off so's I can wash the mud out of 'em."

A sun suit for Patty and bathing trunks for me were our household garb; when we went out for the afternoon we pulled on blue denim shirts and slacks over them to ward off the venomous mosquitoes. We stripped off the dungarees and I searched the bank and found a root broad enough for me to squat on while I rinsed off the worst of the filth we had picked up in our scramble up the bank. Patty made herself comfortable on a bed of dry Spanish moss that she tore out of the trees. As I worked, a movement in midstream caught my eye. A black tentacle poked up out of the water, and, steadily then, the slimy branches of the thing that had foundered us came sloshing into the mottled sunlight. It was a horrible sight, the horror of which was completely dispelled by the sight of the sleek green flank of the canoe which bobbed up beside it.

I ran back up my root, tossed the wet clothes on a convenient branch, broke a long stick off a dead tree and reached out over the water. I could just reach one end of the canoe. Slowly I maneuvered it away from its black captor and pulled it to me. I went into mud up to my knees in the process but managed to reach it; and then it was but the work of a moment to beach it, empty out the water and set it safely with its stern on the bank. Then I pegged out our clothes in a patch of hot sunlight and went back to Patty.

She was lying on her back with her hands on her eyes, shielding them from the light. Apparently she had not seen me rescue the canoe. I glanced at it and just then saw the slimy mass in mid-bayou start sinking again.

"Daddy," she said drowsily, "what was that awful thing that sinked us?"

"What they call a sawyer," I said. "It's the waterlogged butt of a cypress tree. The bottom is heavy and the top is light, and when the roots catch in something on the bottom the current pushes the top under. Then one of the branches rots and falls off, and the top end gets light again and floats up. Then the current will push it down again. It'll keep that up for weeks."

"Oh," she said. After a long, thoughtful pause she said, "Daddy—"

"What?"

"Cover me up." I grinned and tore down masses of moss with which I buried her. Her sleepy sigh sounded from under the pile. I lay down in the shade close by, switching lazily at mosquitoes.

I must have dozed for a while. I woke with a start, fumbling through my mind for the thing that had disturbed me. My first glance was at the pile of moss; all seemed well there. I turned my head. About eight inches from my face was a pair of feet.

I stared at them. They were bare and horny and incredibly scarred. Flat, too—splayed. The third toe of each foot was ever so much longer than any of the others. They were filthy. Attached to the feet was a scrawny pair of ankles; the rest was out of my range of vision. I debated sleepily whether or not I had seen enough, suddenly realized that there was something not quite right about this, and bounced to my feet.

I found myself staring into the blazing eye of the most disgusting old hag that ever surpassed imagination. She looked like a Cartier illustration. Her one good eye was jaundiced and mad; long, slanted—feline. It wasn't until long afterward that I realized that her pupil was not round but slitted—not vertically like a cat's eyes, but horizontally. Her other eye looked like—well, I'd rather not say. It couldn't possibly have been of any use to her. Her nose would have been hooked if the tip were still on it. She was snaggle-toothed, and her fangs were orange. One shoulder was higher than the other, and the jagged lump on it spoke of a permanent dislocation. She had enough skin to adequately cover a sideshow fat lady, but she couldn't have weighed more than eighty pounds or so. I never saw great swinging wattles on a person's upper arms before. She was clad in a feathered jigsaw of bird and small animal skins. She was diseased and filthy and—and evil.

And she spoke to me in the most beautiful contralto voice I have ever heard.

"How you get away from River Spider?" she demanded.

"River Spider?"

She pointed, and I saw the sawyer rising slowly from the bayou. "Oh—that." I found that if I avoided that baleful eye I got my speech back. I controlled an impulse to yell at her, chase her away. If Patty woke up and saw that face—

"What's it to you?" I asked quietly, just managing to keep my voice steady.

"I send River Spider for you," she said in her Cajun accent.

"Why?" If I could mollify her—she was manifestly furious at something, and it seemed to be me—perhaps she'd go her way without waking the child.

"Because you mus' go!" she said. "This my countree. This swamp belong Séleen. Séleen belong this swamp. Wan man make *p'tit cabane* in bayou, Séleen *l'enchante*. Man die far away, smash."

"You mean you haunted the man who had my

cabin built and he died?" I grinned. "Don't be silly."

"Man is dead, no?"

I nodded. "That don't cut ice with me, old lady. Now look—we aren't hurting your old swamp. We'll get out of it, sure; but we'll go when we're good and ready. You leave us alone and we'll sure as hell"—I shuddered, looking at her—"leave you alone."

"You weel go *now—ce jour!*" She screamed the last words, and the pile of moss behind me rustled suddenly.

"I won't go today or tomorrow or next week," I snapped. I stepped toward her threateningly. "Now beat it!"

She crouched like an animal, her long crooked hands half raised. From behind me the moss moved briskly, and Patty's voice said, "Daddy, what oh. *Ohh!*"

That does it, I said to myself, and lunged at the old woman with some crazy idea of shoving her out of the clearing. She leaped aside like a jackrabbit and I tripped and fell on my two fists, which dug into my solar plexus agonizingly. I lay there mooing "uh! uh! u-u-uh!" trying to get some wind into my lungs, and finally managed to get an elbow down and heave myself over on my side. I looked, and saw Séleen crouched beside Patty. The kid sat there, white as a corpse, rigid with terror, while the old nightmare crooned to her in her lovely voice.

"Ah! C'est une jolie jeune-fille, ca! Ah, ma petite, ma fleur douce, Séleen t'aime, trop, trop—" and she put out her hand and stroked Patty's neck and shoulder.

When I saw the track of filth her hand left on the child's flesh, a white flame exploded in my head and dazzled me from inside. When I could see again I was standing beside Patty, the back of one hand aching and stinging; and Séleen was sprawled eight feet away, spitting out blood and yellow teeth and frightful curses.

"Go away." I whispered it because my throat was all choked up. "Get—out—of—here—before—I—kill you!"

She scrambled to her knees, her blazing eye filled with hate and terror, shook her fist and tottered swearing away into the heavy swamp growth.

When she had gone I slumped to the ground, drenched with sweat, cold outside, hot inside, weak as a newborn babe from reaction. Patty crawled to me, dropped her head in my lap, pressed the back of my hand to her face and sobbed so violently that I was afraid she would hurt herself. I lifted my hand and stroked her hair. "It's all right, now, Patty—don't be a little dope, now—come on," I said more firmly, lifting her face by its pointed chin and holding it until she opened her eyes. "Who's Yehudi?"

She gulped bravely. "Wh-who?" she gasped.

"The little man who turns on the light in the refrigerator when you open the door," I said. "Let's go find out what's for dinner."

"I I—" She puckered all up the way she used to do when she slept in a bassinet—what I used to call "baby's slow burn." And then she wailed the same way. "I don' want dinno-o-o!"

I thumped her on the back, picked her up and dropped her on top of her dungarees. "Put them pants on," I said, "and be a man." She did, but she cried quietly until I shook her and said gently, "Stop it now. I didn't carry on like that when I was a little girl." I got into my clothes and dumped her into the bow of the canoe and shoved off.

All the way back to the cabin I forced her to play one of our pet games. I would say something—anything—and she would try to say something that rhymed with it. Then it would be her turn. She had an extraordinary rhythmic sense, and an excellent ear.

I started off with "We'll go home and eat our dinners."

"An' Lord have mercy on us sinners," she cried. Then, "Let's see you find a rhyme for 'month'!"

"I bet I'll do it . jutht thith onth," I replied. "I guess I did it then, by cracky."

"Course you did, but then you're wacky. Top that, mister funny-lookin'!"

I pretended I couldn't, mainly because I couldn't, and she soundly kicked my shin as a penance. By the time we reached the cabin she was her usual self, and I found myself envying the resilience of youth. And she earned my undying respect by saying nothing to Anjy about the afternoon's events, even when Anjy looked us over and said, "Just look at you two filthy kids! What have you been doing—swimming in the bayou?"

"Daddy splashed me," said Patty promptly.

"And you had to splash him back. Why did he splash you?"

"'Cause I spit mud through my teeth at him to make him mad," said my outrageous child.

"Patty!"

"Mea culpa," I said, hanging my head. "'Twas I who spit the mud."

Anjy threw up her hands. "Heaven knows what sort of a woman Patty's going to grow up to be," she said, half angrily.

"A broad-minded and forgiving one like her lovely mother," I said quickly.

"Nice work, bud," said Patty.

Anjy laughed. "Outnumbered again. Come in and feed the face."

On my next trip into Minette I bought a sweet little S. & W. .38 and told Anjy it was for alligators. She was relieved.

I might have forgotten about the hag Séleen if it were not for the peculiar chain of incidents which had led to our being here. We had started with some vague idea of spending a couple of months in Natchez or New Orleans, but a gas station attendant had mentioned that there was a cabin in the swamps for rent very cheap down here. On investigation we found it not only unbelievably cheap, but deep in real taboo country. Not one of the natives, hardened swamp runners all, would go within a mile of it. It had been built on order for a very wealthy Northern gentleman who had never had a chance to use it, due to a swift argument he and his car had had one day when he turned out to pass a bridge. A drunken rice farmer told me that it was all the doing of the Witch of Minette, a semimythological local character who claimed possession of that corner of the country. I had my doubts, being a writer of voodoo stories and knowing therefore that witches and sech are nonsense.

After my encounter with Séleen I no longer doubted her authenticity as a horrid old nightmare responsible for the taboo. But she could rant, chant, and ha'nt from now till a week come Michaelmas—when *is* Michaelmas, anyway?—and never pry me loose from that cabin until I was ready to go. She'd have to fall back on enchantment to do it, too—of that I was quite, quite sure. I remembered her blazing eye as it had looked when I struck her, and I knew that she would never dare to come within my reach again. If she as much as came within my sight with her magics I had a little hocus-pocus of my own that I was sure was more powerful than anything she could dream up. I carried it strapped to my waist, in a holster, and while it couldn't call up any ghosts, it was pretty good at manufcturing 'em.

As for Patty, she bounced resiliently away from the episode. Séleen she dubbed the Witch of Endor, and used her in her long and involved games as an archvillain in place of Frankenstein's monster, Adolf Hitler, or Miss McCauley, her schoolteacher. Many an afternoon I watched her from the hammock on the porch, cooking up dark plots in the witch's behalf and then foiling them in her own coldbloodedly childish way. Once or twice I had to put a stop to it, like the time I caught her hanging the Witch of Endor in effigy, the effigy being a rag doll, its poor throat cut with benefit of much red paint. Aside from these games she never mentioned Séleen, and I respected her for it. I saw to it that she didn't stray alone into the swamp and relaxed placidly into my role

of watchful skeptic. It's nice to feel oneself superior to a credulous child.

Foolish, too. I didn't suspect a thing when Patty crept up behind me and hacked off a lock of my hair with my hunting knife. She startled me and I tumbled out of the hammock onto my ear as she scuttled off. I muttered imprecations at the little demon as I got back into the hammock, and then comforted myself by the reflection that I was lucky to have an ear to fall on—that knife was sharp.

A few minutes later Anjy came out to the porch. Anjy got herself that name because she likes to wear dresses with masses of tiny pleats and things high on her throat, and great big picture hats. So *ingenue* just naturally became Anjy. She is a beautiful woman with infinite faith and infinite patience, the proof of which being that: a—she married me and, b—she stayed married to me.

"Jon, what sort of crazy game is your child playing?" She always said "your child" when she was referring to something about Patty she didn't like.

"S'matter?"

"Why, she just whipped out that hog-sticker of yours and made off with a hank of my hair."

"No! Son of a gun! What's she doing—taking up barbering? She just did the same thing to me. Thought she was trying to scalp me and miscalculated, but I must have been wrong—she wouldn't miss twice in a row."

"Well, I want you to take that knife away from her," said Anjy. "It's dangerous."

I got out of the hammock and stretched. "Got to catch her first. Which way'd she go?"

After a protracted hunt I found Patty engaged in some childish ritual of her own devising. She pushed something into a cleft at the foot of a tree, backed off a few feet, and spoke earnestly. Neither of us could hear a word she said. Then she backed still farther away and squatted down on her haunches, watching the hole at the foot of the tree carefully.

Anjy clasped her hands together nervously, opened her mouth. I put my hands over it. "Let me take care of it," I whispered, and went out.

"Whatcha doin', bud?" I called to Patty as I came up. She started violently and raised one finger to her lips. "Catchin' rabbits?" I asked as loudly as I could without shouting. She gestured me furiously away. I went and sat beside her.

"Please, daddy," she said, "I'm making a magic. It won't work if you stay here. Just this once—please!"

"Nuts," I said bluntly.

away when I moved here."

She tried to be patient. "Will you *please* go away? Oh, daddy. Daddy, PLEASE!"

It was rough but I felt I had to do it. I lunged for her, swept her up, and carried her kicking and squalling back to the cabin. "Sorry, kiddo, but I don't like the sort of game you're playing. You ought to trust your dad."

I meant to leave her with Anjy while I went out to confiscate that bundle of hair. Not that I believe in such nonsense. But I'm the kind of unsuperstitious apple that won't walk under a ladder *just in case* there's something in the silly idea. But Patty really began to throw a whingding, and there was nothing for me to do but to stand by until it had run its course. Patty was a good-natured child, and only good-natured children can work themselves up into that kind of froth. She screamed and she bit, and she accused us of spoiling everything and we didn't love her and she wished she was dead and why couldn't we leave her alone—"Let me alone," she shrieked, diving under the double bed and far beyond our reach. "Take your *hands* off me!" she sobbed when she was ten feet away from us and moving fast. And then her screams became wordless and agonized when we cornered her in the kitchen. We had to be rough to hold her, and her hysteria was agony to us. It took more than an hour for her fury to run its course and leave her weeping weak apologies and protestations of love into her mother's arms. Me, I was bruised outside and in, but inside it hurt the worst. I felt like a heel.

I went out then to the tree. I reached in the cleft for the hair but it was gone. My hand closed on something far larger, and I drew it out and stood up to look at it.

It was a toy canoe, perhaps nine inches long. It was an exquisite piece of work. It had apparently been carved painstakingly from a solid piece of cedar, so carefully that nowhere was the wood any more than an eighth of an inch thick. It was symmetrical and beautifully finished in brilliant colors. They looked to me like vegetable stains—dyes from the swamp plants that grew so riotously all around us. From stem to stern the gunwales were pierced, and three strips of brilliant bark had been laced and woven into the close-set holes. Inside the canoe were four wooden spurs projecting from the hull, the end of each having a hole drilled through it, apparently for the purpose of lashing something inside.

I puzzled over it for some minutes, turning it over and over in my hands, feeling its velvet smoothness, amazed by its metrical delicacy. Then I laid it carefully on the ground and regarded the mysterious tree.

Leafless branches told me it was dead. I got down on my knees and rummaged deep into the hole between the roots. I couldn't begin to touch the inside wall. I got up again, circled the tree. A low branch projected, growing sharply upward

close to the trunk before it turned and spread outward. And around it were tiny scuff marks in the bark. I pulled myself up onto the branch, cast about for a handhold to go higher. There was none. Puzzled, I looked down—and there, completely hidden from the ground, was a gaping hole leading into the hollow trunk!

I thrust my head into it and then clutched the limb with both arms to keep from tottering out of the tree. For that hole reeked with the most sickly, noisome smell I had encountered since . since Patty and I—

Séleen!

I dropped to the ground and backed away from the tree. The whole world seemed in tune with my revulsion. What little breeze there had been had stopped, and the swampland was an impossible painting in which only I moved.

Never taking my eyes off the tree, I went back step by step, feeling behind me until my hand touched the wall of the cabin. My gaze still riveted to the dead bole of the tree, I felt along the wall until I came to the kitchen door. Reaching inside, I found my ax and raced back. The blade was keen and heavy, and the haft of it felt good to me. The wood was rotten, honeycombed, and the clean blade bit almost noiselessly into it. *Thunk!* How dare she, I thought. What does she mean by coming so near us! *Thunk!* I prayed that the frightful old hag would try to fight, to flee, so that I could cut her down with many strokes. It was my first experience with the killer instinct and I found it good.

The sunlight faded out of the still air and left it hotter.

At the uppermost range of my vision I could see the trunk trembling with each stroke of the ax. Soon, now—soon! I grinned and my lips cracked; every other inch of my body was soaking wet. She who would fill Patty's clean young heart with her filthy doings! Four more strokes would do it; and then I remembered that skinny hand reaching out, touching Patty's flesh; and I went cold all over. I raised the ax and heard it hiss through the thick air; and my four strokes were one. Almost without resistance that mighty stroke swished into and through the shattered trunk. The hurtling ax head swung me around as the severed tree settled onto its stump. It fell, crushing its weight into the moist earth, levering itself over on its projecting root; and the thick bole slid toward me, turned from it as I was, off balance. It caught me on the thigh, kicking out at me like a sentient, vicious thing. I turned over and over in the air and landed squashily at the edge of the bayou. But I landed with my eyes on the tree, ready to crawl, if need be, after whatever left it.

Nothing left it. Nothing. There had been nothing there, then, but the stink of her foul body. I lay there weakly, weeping with pain and reaction. And when I looked up again I saw Séleen again—or perhaps it was a crazed vision. She stood on a knoll far up the bayou, and as I watched she doubled up with silent laughter. Then she straightened and lifted her arm; and, dangling from her fingers, I saw the tiny bundle of hair. She laughed again though I heard not a sound. I knew then that she had seen every bit of it—had stood there grinning at my frantic destruction of her accursed tree. I lunged toward her, but she was far away, and across the water; and at my movement she vanished into the swamp.

I dragged myself to my feet and limped toward the cabin. I had to pass the tree, and as I did the little canoe caught my eye. I tucked it under my arm and crept back to the cabin. I tripped on the top step of the porch and fell sprawling, and I hadn't strength to rise. My leg was an agony, and my head spun and spun.

Then I was inside and Anjy was sponging off my head, and she laughed half hysterically when I opened my eyes. "Jon, Jon, beloved, what have you done? Who did this to you?"

"Who heh!" I said weakly. "A damn fool, sweetheart. Me!" I got up and stood rockily. "How's Pat?"

"Sleeping," said Anjy. "Jon, what on earth is happening?"

"I don't know," I said slowly, and looked out through the window at the fallen tree. "Anjy, the kid took that hair she swiped and probably some of her own and poked it all into that tree I just cut down. It—seems important for me to get it back. Dunno why. It . . . anyway, I got out there as soon as we had Pat quieted, but the hair had disappeared in the meantime. All I found was this." I handed her the canoe.

She took it absently. "Pat told me her story. Of course it's just silly, but she says that for the past three days that tree has been talking to her. She says it sang to her and played with her. She's convinced it's a magic tree. She says it promised her a lovely present if she would poke three kinds of hair into a hole at the roots; but if she told anyone the magic wouldn't work." Anjy looked down at the little canoe and her forehead puckered. "Apparently it worked," she whispered.

I couldn't comment without saying something about Séleen, and I didn't want that on Anjy's mind, so I turned my back on her and stood looking out into the thick wet heat of the swamp.

Behind me I heard Patty stir, shriek with delight as she saw the canoe. "My present . . . my pretty present! It was a *real* magic!" And Anjy gave it to her.

I pushed down an impulse to stop her. As long as Séleen had the hair the harm was done.

Funny, how suddenly I stopped being a skeptic.

The silence of the swamp was shattered by a

great cloud of birds—birds of every imaginable hue and size, screaming and cawing and chuckling and whirring frantically. They startled me and I watched them for many minutes before it dawned on me that they were all flying one way. The air grew heavier after they had gone. Anjy came and stood beside me.

And then it started to rain.

I have never seen such rain, never dreamed of it. It thundered on the shingles, buckshotted the leaves of the trees, lashed the mirrored bayou and the ground alike, so that the swamp was but one vast brown steam of puckered mud.

Anjy clutched my arm. "Jon, I'm frightened!" I looked at her and knew that it wasn't the rain that had whitened her lips, lit the fires of terror in her great eyes. "Something out there—*hates* us," she said simply.

I shook her off, threw a poncho over me. "Jon—you're not—"

"I got to," I gritted. I went to the door, hesitated, turned back and pressed the revolver into her hand. "I'll be all right," I said, and flung out into the storm. Anjy didn't try to stop me.

I knew I'd find the hag Séleen. I knew I'd find her unharmed by the storm, for was it not a thing of her own devising? And I knew I must reach her—quickly, before she used that bundle of hair. Why, and how did I know? Ask away. I'm still asking myself, and I have yet to find an answer.

I stumbled and floundered, keeping to the high ground, guided, I think, by my hate. After a screaming eternity I reached a freakish rocky knoll that thrust itself out of the swamp. It was cloven and cracked, full of passages and potholes; and from an opening high on one side I saw the guttering glare of firelight. I crept up the rough slope and peered within.

She crouched over the flames, holding something to her withered breast and crooning to it. The rock walls gathered her lovely, hateful voice and threw it to me clear and strong—to me and to the turgid bayou that seethed past the cleft's lower edge.

She froze as my eyes fell upon her, sensing my presence; but like many another animal she hadn't wit enough to look upward. In a moment she visibly shrugged off the idea, and she turned and slid and shambled down toward the bayou. Above her, concealed by the split rock, I followed her

until we were both at the water's edge with only a four-foot stone rampart between us. I could have reached her easily then, but I didn't dare attack until I knew where she had hidden that bundle of hair.

The wind moaned, rose an octave. The rain came in knives instead of sheets. I flattened myself against the rock while Séleen shrank back into the shelter of the crevice. I will never know how long we were there, Séleen and I, separated by a few boulders, hate a tangible thing between us. I remember only a shrieking hell of wind and rubble, and then the impact of something wet and writhing and whimpering against me. It had come rolling and tumbling down the rocky slope and it lodged against me. I was filled with horror until I realized that it sheltered me a little against the blast. I found the strength to turn and look at it finally. It was Patty.

I got her a little under me and stuck it out till the wind had done its work and was gone, and with it all the deafening noise—all but the rush of the bayou and Séleen's low chuckle.

"Daddy—" She was cut and battered. "I brought my little boat!" She held it up weakly.

"Yes, butch. Sure. That's dandy. Patty—what happened to mother?"

"She's back there," whimpered Patty. "The cabin sagged, like, an' began m-movin', an' then it just fell apart an' the bits all flew away. I couldn' find her so I came after you."

I lay still, not breathing. I think even my heart stopped for a little while.

Patty's whisper sounded almost happy. "Daddy—I—hurt—all—over—"

Anjy was gone then. I took my hatred instead, embraced it and let it warm me and give me life and hope and strength the way she used to. I crawled up the rock and looked over. I could barely see the hag, but she was there. Something out in the bayou was following the rhythmic movement of her arms. Something evil, tentacled, black. Her twisted claws clutched a tiny canoe like the one she had left in the tree for Patty. And she sang:

"River Spider, black and strong,
Folks 'bout here have done me wrong.
Here's a gif' I send to you,
Got some work for you to do.

"If Anjy-woman miss the flood,
River Spider, drink her blood.
Little one was good to me,
Drown her quick and let her be.

"River Spider, Jon you know,
Kill that man, and—kill—him—slew!"

And Séleen bent and set the canoe on the foaming brown water. Our hair was tied inside it.

Everything happened fast then. I dived from my hiding place behind and above her, and as I did so I sensed that Patty had crept up beside me, and that she had seen and heard it all. And some strange sense warned Séleen, for she looked over her crooked shoulder, saw me in midair, and leaped into the bayou. I had the terrified, malevolent gleam of her single eye full in my face, but I struck only hard rock, and for me even that baleful glow went out.

Patty sat cross-legged with my poor old head in her lap. It was such a gray morning that the wounds on her face and head looked black to me. I wasn't comfortable, because the dear child was rolling my head back and forth frantically in an effort to rouse me. The bones in my neck creaked as she did it and I knew they could hear it in Scranton, Pennsylvania. I transmitted a cautionary syllable but what she received was a regular houn'-dawg howl.

"Owoo! Pat—"

"Daddy! Oh, you're awake!" She mercifully stopped gyrating the world about my tattered ears.

"What happened?" I moaned, half sitting up. She was so delighted to see my head move that she scrambled out from under so that when the ache inside it pounded it back down, it landed stunningly on the rock.

"Daddy darling, I'm sorry. But you got to stop layin' around like that. It's time to get up!"

"Uh. How you know?"

"I'm hungry, that's how, so there."

I managed to sit up this time. I began to remember things and they hurt so much that the physical pain didn't matter any more. "Patty! We've got to get back to the cabin!"

She puckered up. I tried to grin at her and she tried to grin back, and there is no more tragedy left in the world for me after having seen that. I did a sort of upward totter and got what was left of my feet and legs under me. Both of us were a mess, but we could navigate.

We threaded our way back over a new, wrecked landscape. It was mostly climbing and crawling, and once when Patty slipped and I reached for her I knocked the little canoe out of her hand. She actually broke and ran to pick it up. "Daddy! You got to be careful of this!"

I groaned. It was the last thing in the world I ever wanted to see. But then— Anjy had said that she should have it. And when she next dropped it I picked it up and handed it back to her. And then snatched it again.

"Patty! What's this?" I pointed to the little craft's cargo: a tiny bundle of hair.

"That's the little bag from the tree, silly."

"But how where . I thought—"

"I made a magic," she said with finality. "Now please, daddy, don't stand here and talk. We have to get back to .y-you know."

If you don't mind, I won't go into detail about how we dragged trees and rubbish away to find what was left of our cabin, and how we came upon the pathetic little heap of shingles and screening and furniture and how, wedged in the firm angle of two mortised two-by-fours, we found Anjy. What I felt when I lifted her limp body away from the rubble, when I kissed her pale lips—that is mine to remember. And what I felt when those lips returned my kiss—oh, so faintly and so tenderly—that, too, is mine.

We rested, the three of us, for five days. I found part of our store of canned goods and a fishing line, though I'm sorry now that we ate any of the fish, after what happened. And when the delirium was over, I got Patty's part of the story. I got it piecemeal, out of sequence, and only after the most profound cross-questioning. But the general drift was this:

She had indeed seen that strange performance in the rocky cleft by the bayou; but what is more, by her childish mysticism, she understood it. At least, her explanation is better than anything I could give. Patty was sure that the River Spider that had attacked us that time in the bayou was sent by Séleen, to whom she always referred as the Witch of Endor. "She did it before, daddy, I jus' betcha. But she didn't have anythin' strong enough for to put on the canoe." I have no idea what she did use—flies, perhaps, or frogs or crayfish. "She hadda have some part of us to make the magic, an' she made me get it for her. She was goin' to put that li'l' ol' hair ball in a canoe, an' if a River Spider caught it then the Spider would get us, too."

When I made that crazed leap for the old woman she had nowhere to go but into the bayou. Pat watched neither of us. She watched the canoe. She always claimed that she hooked it to shore with a stick, but I have a hunch that the little idiot plunged in after it. "They was one o' those big black sawyer things right there," she said, "an' it almos' catched the canoe. I had a lot of trouble." I'll bet she did.

"You know," she said pensively, "I was mad at that ol' Witch of Endor. That was a mean thing she tried to do to us. So I did the same thing to her. I catched the ugliest thing I could find—all crawly and nasty an' bad like the Witch of Endor. I found a nice horrid one, too, you betcha. An' I tied him into my canoe with your shoelaces, daddy. You di'n' say not to. An' I singed to it:

"Ol' Witch of Endor is your name,
An' you an' Witchie is the same;
Don't think it's a game."

She showed me later what sort of creature she had caught for her little voodoo boat. Some call it a mud puppy and some call it a hellbender, but it is without doubt the homeliest thing ever created. It is a sort of aquatic salamander, anywhere from three inches to a foot and a half in length. It has a porous, tubercular skin with two lateral streamers of skin on each side; and these are always ragged and torn. The creature always looks as if it is badly hurt. It has almost infinitesimal fingered legs, and its black shoe-button eyes are smaller than the head of a hatpin. For the hag Séleen there could be no better substitute.

"Then," said Patty complacently, "I singed that song the way the Witch of Endor did:

"River Spider, black an' strong,
Folks 'bout here have done me wrong.
Here's a gif' I send to you,
Got some work for you to do."

"The rest of the verse was silly," said Pat, "but I had to think real fast for a rhyme for 'Witch of Endor' an' I used the first thing that I could think of quicklike. It was somepin I read on your letters, daddy, an' it was silly."

And that's all she would say for the time being. But I do remember the time she called me quietly down to the bayou and pointed out a sawyer to me, because it was the day before Carson came in a power launch from Minette to see if we had survived the hurricane; and Carson came six days after the big blow. Patty made absolutely sure that her mother was out of hearing, and then drew me by the hand down to the water's edge. "Daddy," she said, "we got to keep this from mother on account of it would upset her," and she pointed.

Three or four black twisted branches showed on the water, and as I watched they began to rise. A huge sawyer, the biggest I'd ever seen, reared up and up—and tangled in its coils was a . . . a *something*.

Séleen had not fared well, tangled in the whips of the River Spider under water for five days, in the company of all those little minnows and crawfish.

Patty regarded it critically while my stomach looped itself around violently and finally lodged between my spine and the skin of my back. "She ain't pretty a-*tall!*" said my darling daughter. "She's even homelier'n a mud puppy, I betcha."

As we walked back toward the lean-to we had built, she prattled on in this fashion: "Y'know, daddy, that was a real magic. I thought my verse was a silly one but I guess it worked out right after all. Will you laugh if I tell you what it was?"

I said I did not feel like laughing.

"Well," said Patty shyly, "I said:

"Spider, kill the Witch of Endor.
If five days lapse, return to sender."

That's my daughter.

THE END.

IT WILL COME TO YOU

By Frank Belknap Long

● There was a psychological block; he couldn't, for some reason, remember who or what he was. The reason—was plenty!

Bannerman had assured him that he would like this job.

"Cromer, you couldn't have anything nicer," Bannerman had pointed out. "It's right down your alley. I'll make out the credentials and bright and early tomorrow morning you'll be working again."

Cromer always seemed to be out of a job. Then Bannerman would summon him, new credentials would be prepared, and he'd have a soft snap for a week or two.

He couldn't seem to hold jobs. Sooner or later the truth would leak out, and Bannerman would have to go to a lot of trouble to keep him off the bread lines. It was plenty gruesome. If only he could remember what Bannerman looked like.

But he couldn't seem to. He'd have jobs and then lose them. If only he could remember—

"Yes, Mr. Cromer. Right this way please," the little man was saying.

He seemed to be in a sort of laboratory. There were tall, uncurtained windows on both sides of

him, and on the table toward which he was advancing was— Good heavens, it didn't seem possible.

On the table was a full-course dinner—from soup to nuts!

"This was sent down from the Midtown Hotel," the little man said. "You'd better check each course separately."

Cromer nodded. He seemed to know what was expected of him. "They're putting the screws on a new chef, eh? How about the fowl itself?"

It's from the Richardson Poultry Market. I suggest you concentrate on tenderness and skin fat, and forget about the seasoning. Richardson's broilers are well shaped, but the hotel is thinking about switching to Hegarty & Reuper.

"O. K.," Cromer said.

He pulled up a stool, sat down and dismissed the little man with a nod. There were forks and spoons on the table, and even a paper napkin. He tucked the napkin into his vest, picked up a spoon and went to work.

"Hm-m-m," he murmured, as something that tasted like chicken soup slid down his gullet. "Hm-m-m, not bad."

He drew a chart toward him, made a notation. "No complaint on that score," he murmured. "We'll try the salad."

It was a tomato-pepper salad, decked out with sliced cucumbers.

"Excellent," he exclaimed, and made another notation.

The chicken occupied him for ten full minutes. He glanced furtively over his shoulder before he ripped it apart with his fingers, and reduced the breast and one wing to a gleaming jumble of bones. He was munching on a drumstick when someone called to him from the back of the laboratory.

"You're wanted on the telephone, Mr. Cromer."

He had only the vaguest recollection of passing from the laboratory, descending three flights of stairs, and answering the call that had come for him. And yet the instant he heard Jane Wilder's voice everything seemed to snap back into place. He had money in his pockets and could step out again. He was working again.

"Put on your best night-club bonnet, sweetkins," he said. "We're going to celebrate."

Replacing the receiver, he had a memory of her, scornful and malicious, flinging herself away from him, and refusing to let him touch her. But all that would be changed now. He was working again, and could hold his head high.

Traveling across the city to her apartment hotel his heart skipped a beat every time he glanced at his watch. Only fifteen minutes more now, he thought—eleven, eight, four.

It seemed like a dream. After long ages they were together again. He was crushing her in his arms and disarranging her hair with his huge, hungry hands.

"You'll never be sorry, darling," he said.

Jane Wilder wrinkled her nose. She had no illusions on that score. She'd be sorry every other week, she told herself—married to a man who couldn't keep the wolf at bay. But eligible bachelors were none too plentiful nowadays, what with the draft, and the way the older ones were being fought over by younger and more attractive women than herself.

None too plentiful, and a hard-headed bachelor girl like herself, an ex-airplane hostess, had no silly romantic notions about the dependableness of males. Besides, she could always return his ring, and switch to a better prospect—when and if one came along.

"You've got another job? Another different kind of job?" she asked, looking straight at him.

Cromer nodded. "Darling, I'm a food taster now."

"But how could you just go out, and get a job like that?" she flung at him.

One thing he had acquired was a habit of caution. He had never discussed Bannerman with Jane, and had no intention of doing so now.

"Darling, we won't talk about that," he said. "See here, look—I've got what it takes."

He opened his wallet and showed her eight crisp ten-dollar bills.

"Eighty a week, sweetkins. getting a raise."

Jane's eyes became faintly luminous. She came into his arms again, and for a moment he experienced a sense of perfect fulfillment.

"Let's go somewhere where we can dance," she said.

A half-hour later, seated at a secluded corner table in the Ten O'Clock Club, Cromer noticed with a little stab of pleasure that everyone was gazing at Jane Wilder with admiration. She knew how to wear clothes to the best possible advantage and was in all respects a remarkable woman.

"Well, let's dance," she said.

Cromer nodded, rose and pushed back his chair. Out on the dance floor he gave up trying to remember what Bannerman looked like. His happiness had gone to his head and all his thoughts were centered on the woman in his arms. Around and around they waltzed, to the strains of soft music.

Someone was tapping Cromer on the shoulder. "You're wanted on the phone, sir. A Mr. Bannerman—"

An ice-cold measuring worm came out at the base of Cromer's spine and crawled up his back with little jerks and pauses. Abruptly he stopped waltzing. The waiter stepped back and Jane

seemed to stiffen. Into the dreamy waltz music there crept a funeral cadence, as though even the orchestra had sensed something in Cromer's manner which was as unnerving as a casket on wheels.

Moving like an automaton, Cromer led Jane back to the corner table and pulled out a chair for her.

"Who is Mr. Bannerman?" she demanded, glaring up at him. "Why is he always sending for you?"

"He isn't always sending for me, darling," Cromer stammered. "I haven't seen him for well, for quite a long time."

He stooped and kissed her, his face as grim as death. "I'll have to take that call, darling," he said. "But I'll be back—I promise you."

"The last time you didn't come back."

Cromer looked at her steadily. "I'll be back in five minutes," he assured her.

Why had he said that? He could still hear Bannerman's voice coming furiously over the wire. "This is just about the last straw, Cromer. I got you a job which was right down your alley. Don't you ever catch on?"

"I'm sorry, sir."

"You'd better be. Grab a taxi and come right over here."

He was sitting now as rigid as a tailor's dummy in a speeding taxi, his hat wedged between his knees.

"What address did you say, buddy?" the driver asked, scowling back at him.

"I told you. No. 13 Oak Street."

"Well, this is it, buddy," the driver said, drawing in to the curb.

The same old steps again, crumbling, moldy. The wallpaper peeling off. Although he had only a vague memory of watching the cab drive away every aspect of Bannerman's house seemed to impinge on his senses with the force of a physical blow.

Climbing the bare oak stairway, he had to cling to the banisters to steady himself; and as he neared the first-floor landing his hearing became so abnormally acute he could have heard a pin dropping.

He had paused before a familiar, light-rimmed door halfway down the upper hallway, and was blinking quite steadily when Bannerman's voice rang out.

"Come in, Cromer."

Cromer didn't *want* to obey. He didn't *want* to face Bannerman. But though cutting off his right arm would have been easier, he had no choice. Gulping something out of his throat he stepped into Bannerman's study and shut the door behind him.

Bannerman was standing in shadows a little to the left of the crystal, a black felt hat pulled far down over his face. He was puffing on a cigar, but he took it out of his mouth the instant the door clicked shut.

"I've been waiting for this moment, Cromer," he said. "You've tripped over every opportunity I've thrown in your path. I've been telling myself it was partly my fault, but you can't alibi yourself this time, Cromer, *and you'd better not try.*"

Cromer scarcely heard him. His gaze was riveted on the huge crystal globe which stood on a black onyx pedestal near the center of the room. He had seen the globe before, but now it was brimming with a blood-red radiance and there were . . . yes, there were two livid forms stretched out in the midst of the glow.

"I knew you'd be startled, Cromer," Bannerman said.

Cromer wasn't merely startled. His eyes bulged, his teeth clicked together, and sweat poured out all over him. He had recognized one of the stiff, livid figures. It was the little man who had ushered him into the laboratory. He had never seen a face so gray, limbs so rigid.

"Are . . . are they dead?" he croaked.

Bannerman shook his head. "Ptomaine poisoning," he said. "They are very sick men. It's all your fault, Cromer."

"My fault—"

"That's what I said. Cromer, I prepared some splendid recommendations for you. I even . . . oh, what's the use. You O. K.'d that food on the chart, and these two men, your fellow laboratory workers, helped themselves to a drumstick you left lying about. A fine food taster you turned out to be."

Cromer's face was now dead-white in its pallor. "But that chicken was all right, sir," he gasped.

"You mean it tasted all right to *you*, Cromer?"

"Yes, it did. I—"

"Cromer, how can you be so stupid? If it tasted all right to you it had to be as high as a kite."

"I don't understand, sir," hoarsely.

It was Bannerman's turn to evince agitation. "You mean to say you've had another lapse of memory?"

"Another lapse of sir?"

"Twice before," Bannerman almost groaned. "No wonder you thought that chicken was all right."

The lighted end of Bannerman's cigar described a glowing arc in the shadows.

"It will come to you, Cromer," into the crystal. Concentrate."

Cromer obeyed, his heart hammering against his ribs.

In the midst of the glow, above the two stricken laboratory workers, a tall, emaciated figure came slowly into sight. First the head took shape, then the shadowy outlines of bony shoulders, and finally there emerged a complete figure enveloped in a black aura which inked out the blood-red radiance in the depths of the globe.

The figure had the look of something that ought never to have been dug up. There was hardly any flesh on it, and its teeth were pointed like those of a beast of prey, and there was that about it which seemed to fasten on Cromer, as though it wanted to draw his brain out through his mouth, and suck all the marrow from his bones.

"Cromer, that is *you*," Bannerman said. "You are looking at your own real self."

Cromer couldn't seem to breathe.

"Cromer, you can't say that I don't treat my minions right. I built a fleshly tenement for you which could pass muster anywhere on earth, and I got you a job which was right down your alley. I thought, of course, you would make good and be in a position to serve me. You have to be a good worker before you can be a bad worker, Cromer. You have to win the confidence of employers.

"Cromer, you fell down on your job. You forgot that an unsavory fowl would taste good to you—delicious, in fact. Why did you forget, Cromer? Was it because you wanted to escape from yourself?"

A devilish smile came into Bannerman's face. "You *know* what you are now, Cromer. Do you still want to escape?"

"I do, I do," Cromer sobbed. "I have always wanted to escape. I couldn't *stand* it."

"I see. Compensatory amnesia. Cromer, you may as well face it. What are you?"

"Oh, God, I—"

Bannerman turned pale. "Don't ever . . . watch your tongue, Cromer."

"I'd rather die than be what I am," Cromer choked.

"Come, come, Cromer," Bannerman chided. "Get a grip on yourself. Face it like a man. Face it and I'll see what I can do about getting you another job."

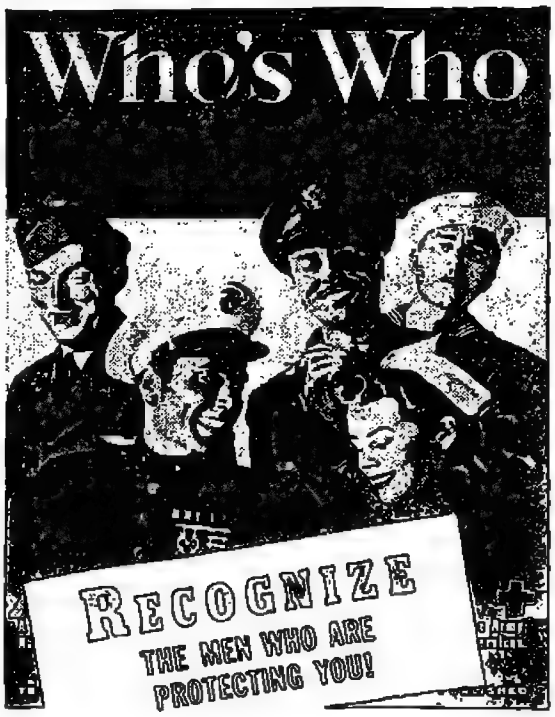
As he spoke, Bannerman removed his hat and exposed a shining, hairless pate from which sprouted two stubby horns.

Cromer fell to his knees, clawed despairingly at his chest.

"Well?" Lucifer prodded. "What are you, Cromer?"

Cromer's voice, when it came, was like a whisper from the tomb.

"I am a ghoul."



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BOOK REVIEW

A BOOK OF PROPHECY FROM THE EGYPTIANS TO HITLER. Edited with an introduction by John Cournos. Decorations by John C. Wonsetler. 274 pp. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942.

Times of crisis are times for prophecy. When the world runs along smoothly today, the man in the street takes for granted that it will run along equally smoothly tomorrow; but when today is a nightmare of tortured anxiety, the man in the street wants to know what happens next. When the future is of no immediate concern to him, he is inclined to believe that prophecy is nonsense. When the concern of the future is pressing, he eagerly gulps down any and all prophecy.

Prophecies such as those here assembled by Mr. Cournos may be roughly divided into three classes: hortatory, logical and oracular.

The hortatory form is most familiar to us in the prophets of the old Testament. For the Agnostic who chooses to disregard the prophets' claim to divine inspiration, it is simply a form of moral warning: Continue in your evil ways, and such and such will befall you.

The logical form of prophecy consists merely in an application of historical method to the future. It lays no claim to any supernormal powers. It simply avers: When the state of the world has been thus and so, this and that have happened. The state of the world now is thus and so; it is exceedingly probable that within so many years this and that will happen.

The only form of prophecy which touches upon unknown worlds is the oracular. This form, which is what we generally mean by prophecy—though the original use of the word referred to the hortatory method—consists of the true statement in advance of that which cannot be normally known or inferred by mortal minds.

For illustration, let us imagine three men, a priest, a scholar, and a magician, attending a levee of Louis XVI.

The priest says, "Sire, unless the nobles of France heed the voice of the Lord and turn again to his commandments, their last days are come."

The scholar says, "Sire, every regime in which the few have more than they can use and the many have less than they must have, must fall. The aristocracy of France is doomed."

The magician says, "Sire, you will die because a man moves his cart swiftly across a road."

It is obviously only the first two forms that are of any use to humanity. Moral suasion or sociological argument may affect the future; direct and specific knowledge of that future never can.

Mr. Cournos' book is an omnium-gatherum of all three forms, with no distinctions made. The hortatory is represented chiefly by biblical excerpts: Isaiah, Ezekiel, brief fragments of the apocryphal Enoch and Esdras, and the complete Apocalypse of John the Divine.

Much of the book, especially its more modern portion, belongs to the logical order. Smollett's prophecy of the French Revolution and Lermontov's of the Russian are simply the conclusions of shrewd observers, and the prophecies of Marx and Lenin, of Nietszche and Spengler are equally the result of deduction rather than inspiration.

There remains what we ordinarily call prophecy. Mr. Cournos finds that the doctrines based on the Great Pyramid read "with startling convincingness," and goes on to quote "A . . . significant date mentioned is September 9 (1938) . . . On this date the British government assumed a firmer attitude to Hitler and informed him of its opposition to his policy of aggression." That date, you will recall, was a month before Munich. The Pyramid informs us further that the present "period of destruction" will have ended by 1853, a curious reverse prophecy presumable attributable to the typesetter.

Mr. Cournos' section on Nostradamus is simply a condensed reprint of Ward's* sections on English history, the French Revolution, and Napoleon, with a handful of uncriticized quatrains of possible contemporary significance.

Other oracular prophets represented include the Roman Sybils, Mother Shipton, Madame Blavatsky.

As a case for the existence of prophecy in this third oracular sense, or even as a collection of texts, the book is not to be compared with that of Henry James Forman.** It has its serious faults: a shocking absence of proofreading which turns many dates into nonsense, as in the pyramid prophecy quoted above or the persistent reference to the date of the Crucifixion as "April 7, A. D."; an utter lack of documentation and sometimes even of the dates at which prophecies were made—a matter of some interest in evaluating them; a curious inconsistency which gives all modern prophecies only in translation—often uncredited—and yet gives forecasts from Seneca and the Iliad in the original with no translation.

It is obviously a book hastily gotten up to meet a hungry market. Yet the curious reader, performing in his own mind the editorial tasks which Mr. Cournos has spared himself, will find much to fascinate him, even though his conclusion may be that prophecy, in the words of the editor, "is elastic and, like history, is repetitive in effect."

ANTHONY BOUCHER

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*Chas. A. Ward. Oracles of Nostradamus. New York, Scribner's, 1940.

**Henry James Forman. The Story of Prophecy. New York, Farrar, 1936.

---AND HAVING WRIT---

That was no accident!
Dear Mr. Campbell:

You bet *Astounding* and Unknown Worlds increase misery in this section of hell. Not only is the horrifying two-months wait detrimental to the health to the minds of your readers, but when the issues do come out they are so uniformly good that the following results: (a) we read them as fast as we can get at them, thus getting them over with sooner, and increasing the wait for the next issue; (b) we sit up late at night reading, thereby ruining our eyes and leaving us worn out and unfit for work the next morning. Such irony!

I read "Prelude to Armageddon" all in one sitting, and have reread it since, due to the fact that it is more of the don't-know-what-it's-about-until-the-end type than even "Slan!" was. Both readings, and all future ones, I am sure, will leave me with an intense feeling of satisfaction, pleasure and superior writing ability. Cartmill is to Unknown Worlds as Heinlein is to *Astounding*. Really remarkable, and I know it's not a pen name, unless Hubbard or Sturgeon have changed their styles terribly. Despite the fact that this was so similar to "Bit of Tapestry," I had no feeling of read-it-all-before that many may have said they have, as I did with "Undesired Princess," and so these two masterpieces go down in the Unknown Worlds hall of fame side by side. (Actually, the only novel I really didn't like was "Castle of Iron," which I put off reading for weeks, and didn't like when I did.) All the shorts in April were grand; "Jesus Shoes" was especially fine.

June issue! Not quite as good, but still very good. "Solomon's Stone" was also read in one evening. I was duly entranced and thrilled by the amusing and exciting occurrences in this captivating novel. It was good, very good. De Camp picked up after February. The shorts were all good, especially Miss Rice's, but I think there is an error or so in Arthur's story, as is so often with time stories.

And now the August issue, the best yet! I got it somewhat before noon on the 30th, and by 10:30 the entire thing was read, a *tour de force* never before accomplished by me, save for the phenomenal June, 1940, issue, which I read completely in even less time, I think: from 4 to about 9:30! As to this cover business, I like it, but can there be nothing used but green and yellow? For October, orange, or perhaps a dull red would be nice, but it'll probably be yellow. However, I like this shade of green better than the color on the April issue. The editorial is as good as ever, but I, for one, would rather know what's cooking for October. And only one reader's column in the past year! Can't your composition men work one in with small type? But they do a swell job anyhow, really. And change that awful blocky title on the contents page!

"Hell Is Forever": A magnificent story. He writes like Sturgeon and has a style similar to Hubbard. He worked this all-too-real and all-too-ironic idea out to a masterful conclusion. A bit confusing, I might mention. I had to go over the last few pages again. I am inspired! *I* shall write you a novel! (I was beginning to wonder if de Camp and Cartmill had a monopoly on them.)

"The Ghost": An intriguing idea. Could be, you know.

"Though Poppies Grow": Very fine whimsical, tragic style. I hope Del Rey is over his injury by now; such things are *not* fun.

"The Jumper": No particular comment; good.

Still like "He Shuttles" as the best Sturgeon has written.

"Everything's Jake": Hm-m-m. How about "Snulbug"?

"The Hill and the Hole": A welcome relief from the Gray Mouser and Fafhrd, or whatever it is, series. Good.

"Fighters Never Quit": What is this? Six stories in one issue on people living past their appointed time in one way or another! Good.

"The Wisdom of the East": Whacky as all-creation!

"Step Into My Garden": Much better than the vile "Grab Bags Are Dangerous."

"The Bargain": The part about the Wandering Jew was a little obscure. This is fine, too—they're *all* fine! There is no derogatory comment to be issued; I can only heap redundant praises and songs of joy. For consecutive fineness, these past three issues are unexcelled. How about getting Finlay and making it perfect? I wish you would go monthly, even though the issues of Unknown Worlds are slowly forcing ten volumes of Cooper out.

I read recently of a mystery—ax murder, et cetera—wherein we have a perfect example of telepathy in time and an accident prone. A street-car operator here in 1934, who had never missed a day, on April 17th, just after noon, in perfect health, decided to take the afternoon off and miss his usual run. (I forget his name.) As a result, a man named Cavanaugh took the run uptown, with a man named Harper riding on the back platform with a shotgun. At the end of the line, everyone departed except Cavanaugh, Harper, and a third man in the car, our accident prone. He had witnessed a car accident shortly before; in St. Joseph he had stood talking to a man who had been shot in the middle of a sentence; he had seen a woman run down by a railroad train, and had seen a certain James Stroup knocked off a high bridge girder to his death, besides others. Well, Harper came forward into the car and shot Cavanaugh in the back, killing him. So what have we, I wonder? That's about all there was except that the third man said that Harper had then turned the gun on himself and critically wounded himself. When they questioned Harper shortly before he died in a hospital, he said that *he had had no reason to kill either Cavanaugh or himself*, as Cavanaugh was his friend. He died before he could answer a question asked by a doctor: "Would you have killed anyone who might have been in that car?" I can send you the clipping, but there is not much use. Just thought you might be interested.

If October is as good as August, you'll have a record. As it is, it's still the best bet for fantasy there is.—Damon King

Disagreement on "Poppies." Yes—

Dear Mr. Campbell:

August, 1942, Unknown stories I would list in order of my liking as follows:

1. "Though Poppies Grow"—Grand.
2. "The Bargain."
3. "Hell Is Forever."
4. "The Wisdom of the East."
5. "Everything's Jake."
6. "The Ghost."
7. "The Jumper."
8. "Fighters Never Quit."
9. "The Hill and the Hole."
10. "Step Into My Garden."

Poem good, but not too good. "Of Things Beyond," there have been better ones.

Art—generally good, especially Cartier's. Kramer does a fine job copying Edd's style, but hasn't quite got that "especial something" that Cartier gets which makes him so unique.—E. Everett Evans, 191 Capital Avenue, S. W., Battle Creek, Michigan

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—And, no.

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Reporting on the August Unknown:

There are, really, only two stories worth reading: (1) "The Bargain" and (2) "The Ghost."

By quite a bit, Cleve Cartmill's "The Bargain" flashes past the winning post. Powerful characterization, neat suspense and an all-around excellent bit of writing.

Sturgeon became embroiled in "The Jumper" and ruined an otherwise fair story.

Lester del Rey is about your second-best author, but "Though Poppies Grow" doesn't show it, definitely. The plot is the most comic-bookish bit of tripe that I've read in Unknown in a long time.

Jameson, de Camp, Long—all just plain smell.

"Everything's Jake" and "The Hill and the Hole" both thoroughly capable, nothing more. Would like to see more of "Hawkins," I might add.

Bester both good and bad in "Hell Is Forever."—Harry Jenkins, Jr., 2409 Santee Avenue, Columbia, South Carolina

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Calling Mr. Phillip Haag!
Sorry for that slip. And if there was bribery, I'll bet it was with tin, not gold! You can't make linotype metal with gold!

Dear Mr. Campbell:

Here's the Cournos review, which is possibly more a small essay on prophecy than a strict review, but which I hope may none the less interest you.

This problem of prophecy—what is it, why is it, and what good is it, anyway—is beginning to get me, and I think it's eventually going to turn into a novel, possibly called "Cassandra," which ought to interest you.

Meanwhile, you might solicit your readers to find one Phillip Haag. On March 3, 1933, according to Forman, Mr. Haag sent the following letter to the Los Angeles *Times*, which printed it in facsimile on March 11th:

1. Three nationally prominent men will die between tonight and March 13, 1933.

2. Hell will break out between March 7th and March 13, 1933.

3. Los Angeles will be shaken by a great earthquake on one of three days—March 19th, 20th, or 21st.

4. The peak of the depression will be reached on March 13th. Real adjustment will start to take place March 20th. Complete readjustment will be in effect by September 10, 1933.

5. A greater, happier future lies just before us. This may not be worth a damn—but keep it and see how it works out.

One and three were fulfilled with minor errors of only a couple of days. Four obviously was wrong, and five looks doubtful right now. But I do like two, although to Forman—writing in 1936—its point wasn't obvious.

A two-day error isn't bad for a prophet. All hell to break loose March 7-13. On March 5, 1933, the National Socialist party carried the elections, Hitler became chancellor, and the Reichstag passed the enabling act bestowing extraordinary powers on him.

For a random nonprofessional, Mr. Haag's average is nowise despicable. And I'd like to know who he is, what are his methods, and what else he has to say, especially about the chances on five.

Mr. Campbell, I am not one ordinarily to complain of what happens to any wordage after I've been paid for it. I don't in the least mind common or garden misprints, and I don't mind very much when I find one of Cartier's weirder creations for "The Land of Unreason" inexplicably looming out of the pages of a story of mine. But I do protest when I'm made to indorse what I don't like.

In my review of the Nostradamus crop, I stated that Rolfe Boswell's attempt to correlate Nostradamus with the Apocalypse was "markedly unsuccessful." Your printer, subsidized doubtless by Boswell gold, altered this to "markedly successful."

If anybody should ever quote me on that, I'd have a sweet time justifying it. So will you please put me straight with any of your readers who may have read the Boswell opus and wondered what I found so successful in the attempt?—Anthony Boucher

RENDEZVOUS WITH A CORPSE

A prying finger of yellow, reached down from the full round moon to reveal two men—one tall and wiry, swinging shovels over his shoulder. The other—as round and yellow-skinned as the moon itself. Their mission: corpse exhuming!

Cato Kent, government agent, and his Chinese assistant, Yick "Me-Flee-Agent-Too" Fun, are assigned to grave robbing as one of their first tasks in a grand new series of complete stories by Warren Fabian. This one's entitled FIVE FROM THE MARBLE ANGEL, and it's in the November issue of

DETECTIVE STORY

ON SALE AT ALL NEWSSTANDS

THE ELIXIR

By Jane Rice

● Maybe it was the Witches' Cup, maybe it was the mighty potion of mixed drinks she'd mixed—but something sent her from a 1942 Halloween party to a Salem witch-hunt. At the wrong end of the hunt!

It all began in Clare Holloway's basement playroom. Things have a penchant for beginning in Clare Holloway's playroom. Clare Holloway's playroom is like that. So is Clare Holloway. She has an instinct for the bizarre which, no doubt, accounts in some measure for her success as a dealer in collector's items.

What I mean is most dealers

In collector's items dress normally, behave normally, and get a normal mark-up on their old spool beds and green glass pinch bottles. Clare Holloway dresses like "Bolero" sounds, if you follow me, the part where the music subtly changes into a tempo that makes you want to get up on your hind legs and break your social responsibility over somebody's head, and her behavior has all the qualities of a March wind at a busy intersection on Bargain Day. Consequently, her mark-up on old spool beds and pinch bottles is comparable to real-estate prices during the Florida boom.

Her basement expresses her personality to a T. It is a lulu. It has a bar at one end and a soda fountain at the other. It has an *indoor* barbecue pit, and a small, well-controlled brook complete with burblings and mossy stones and one beaver—also small and rather shiftless and inordinately fond of stuffed olives—and— Well that ought to give you an idea. It's the sort of a playroom where anything can happen and frequently does. It grows on you. On me, anyway. I can go in determined to be ladylike and genteel and invariably I wind up seeing how many Ping-pong balls I can get in my mouth or doing imitations of Gracie Allen doing imitations of Baby Snooks doing imitations of Gracie Allen—is that clear!!!?? or are you as confused as I am?

Clare includes me in her list of invitable people, not for my histrionics, nor because I happen to live next door on the other side of our citified and world-weary hedge, but for the simple reason that I, inadvertently, gave *the* Mrs. Diggots-Marksbury chicken pox last year when she blew into my place by mistake and was down on all fours looking for genuine wormholes in my pickle pine desk before she discovered the desk was brand new, just born Grand Rapids—that she was in the wrong house—and that I was all over blotchy pink spots.

I don't know Clare very well and may I add right here a fervent "Thank God"? I'd just as soon try to be friends with an electrical storm, but, by the same token, am as fascinated. I wouldn't miss one of her parties for anything. They are to me what Angostura bitters are to a Manhattan cocktail so, when "the honor of my presence" was requested at her Halloween shindig, I blithely R. S. V. P.'d "YES."

Like the well-known shot I R. S. V. P.'d and, following the line of least resistance, decided to go as a witch.

Eliza, ebony jewel that she is, on learning of my intended costume put her hands on her more than ample hips and said, "Humph."

Eliza has been with me for fourteen years and regards me with a jaundiced eye. By turns the eye is stern, disapproving, admonitory, occasionally indulgent, but always jaundiced. To Eliza any woman forty-two years of age who hasn't been able to GET married—the capitals are Eliza's; there's a moral somewhere in that upper case "GET" and lower case "married," but I wouldn't know where—and a woman who—to top it off—makes no attempt to hide the light of her graying hair under a henna bushel, and who *will* wear flat-heeled shoes, and who openly likes Limburger cheese, and who makes her living writing mystery novels, is beyond all hope. That "beyond all hope" barely got in under the wire, didn't it?

Anyhow, Eliza said, "Humph."

I said, "The linen closet needs new shelf paper and had you noticed what a beautiful shade of brown the silver is turning and I would suggest a deep-dish apple pie for supper." To no avail.

"Hump," said Eliza. "A witch."

"A witch," I said.

"Now look here, Miss Amy—"

"Eliza I am *not* going to argue the point. A witch."

"Miss Amy, I ain't goin' to—"

"A witch, Eliza."

"Humph. Well, all I got to say is—"

"That's enough, Eliza."

"—that now you has got a chanct—"

"Did you hear me, Eliza? The matter is settled."

"—to put on fancy and cover up yo' face with a mask you sho' ain't showin' no judgment."

"Eliza!"

Eliza sighed. "Yass'm," she said and departed shaking her head and mumbling, "No judgment. No judgment a tall." At the door she turned. "I could fix you up good as that there Madame Pumpadoor or Queen Victrola."

"A witch," I said firmly.

"Yass'm." She waddled off and said no more, but won a moral victory by cutting the shelf paper too short, putting the silver away backward in its little green felt kimonos, and having bread pudding instead of apple pie.

However, come Halloween, I made an excellent witch, but must confess that, viewing myself in the mirror, I quite saw Eliza's point. Eliza lent me her broom and the Dutch oven, the nearest thing I could find to a caldron, and even condescended to help me to my feet and brush me off after I stumbled over the broom and fell down the front steps landing in a tangled heap of black cloak, silver-buckled shoes and peaked hat—held on with the elastic band off my double-chin-remover harness—and decorated with tin-foil stars, moons and cabalistic symbols. She waved a disgusted farewell as I exited across the hedge boundary and confined herself to two short *"tsks"* in place of one loud *"humph."*

I am the original come-early girl. It's a habit of long standing that began during my formative years when I walked

five miles to school in the deep of a New England winter. I discovered then that if I arrived thirty minutes ahead of time I could thaw out my posterior before the potbellied stove and scratch uninhibited at my woolly underwear. Thus, I was the first to arrive at Clare Holloway's—not to scratch or thaw out, but to— Well, never mind, you'll find out soon enough.

I rang the bell and Parkins let me in and together we slid downstairs into the basement playroom. Not purposely, you understand. It was the broom again, but not by so much as a twitching muscle did Parkins let on that this was not his usual mode of locomotion, though he did say, "SQUONK!" when we started our unpremeditated ride and, "OOF!" when we reached the bottom. After which he arose, resettled his spectacles, shot his cuffs, bared his teeth in a frigid smile and—visibly restraining an impulse to shove the Dutch oven over my ears—left me to my own devices.

I like being left with my own devices. They're inquisitive little devils forever poking and prying and sticking their noses into out-of-the-way places. Once in a great while they get me into somewhat difficult situations, like the time they squeezed me into that suit of armor at the Museum and couldn't get me out, and the time they tempted me into entering the log-rolling contest at the Sportsman's Show, and the— Oh, skip it. It's a long list.

At any rate, me and my devices, after exhausting the possibilities of the pumpkin, papier-mâché-cat, corn-shuck-decorated playroom, decided to while away the interlude by mixing us a witch's brew in my Dutch-oven caldron. This was comparatively easy.

I really mixed us one. A gallon squirt of charged water, a pint or so of gin, several scoops of chocolate ice cream, four cherry phosphates, some vermouth, a liberal helping of grenadine, a fillip of butterscotch and one of marshmallow, a dash or rye and one of bourbon, and added a handful of corn candy to give it body. I stirred it around and around with the handle of my broom and made up some words apropos to the moment. Something like "Eegle squeelge uupuluung quinchsnortle" as best I remember, and my devices edged up to me sidewise and whispered, "Taste it. Go on. Taste it."

"Do I look like *that* big a dunce?" I whispered back cynically.

"Yes," they hissed. "Taste it. Go on."

"Listen," I said, "this elixir is for Mrs. Diggots-Marksbury, she of the wormholes. Now leave me alone."

"Fraidy cat."

"Rubbish."

"You are, too. Sissy."

"Fiddlefaddle."

"Dare you."

"Oh, *go* away."

"Double dog dare you."

"Go *away!*"

"Steal a copper cent off a dead man's eye."

"I will *not*—"

"Why, Amy Parrish. We're ashamed. Downright ashamed. *Taking* a dare lying down. Why —"

"I'm not lying down. I'm in a perfectly perpendicular position."

"You know what we mean."

"Nevertheless, I definitely am *not*—"

"Ashamed. That's what. Humiliated. How will we ever hold up our heads in private again? Why, Amy Parrish, we're *mortified.*"

"W-e-l-l, if you put it that way—"

"Now you're talking."

"Just a sip."

"Atta girl."

"One very *small* sip."

"For Pete's sake, shut up and hop to it."

I snaffled a Tom and Jerry cup, but put it down in favor of a beaker of some sort—chipped, cracked, blackened and crumby-looking, but *trés, trés* witchified. I circled the pot of whatchamacallit like a hound dog skeptically investigating a porcupine, dipped up some of the potion and offered it to the beaver. The beaver retired hastily under the water. That should have warned me. But it didn't. I started to sniff the beverage experimentally, reconsidered, and holding my nose between thumb and forefinger I drank the stuff down.

What happened next is a hideous, kaleidoscopic blur. Every nerve in my body kinked into a Single Matthew Walker's knot and my flaming stomach tried to crawl up through my scorched esophagus, but could not because my esophagus was cleaving, terror-stricken, to my backbone which was whipping back and forth like an anguished tail. Dimly I recall dropping the beaker to claw at my throat and stumbling against the Dutch oven I upset its contents all over hell and gone—picked up the broom with the intention of ramming it down my alimentary canal in an effort to clear the track and, then, darkness swooped in on me.

It was a turbulent, cataphonic darkness punctuated with brilliant pin points of light that dissolved and ran together and whirled every which way in the clamorous din that beat at me through the blackness. A boiler factory was as a mother's twilight lullaby in comparison. Explosion crashed on explosion while thunderous combers of pure, unadulterated sound swept over me interspersed with earsplitting, demonical yells that reverberated in ever-increasing waves—deafening waves spreading over a Stygian pool of straight, undiluted noise.

Somebody I couldn't see began to shoot off Catherine Wheels while his equally invisible

brother banged my cranium against the wall of night in rhythm with a barrage bombardment of cannon, artillery, rifle fire, machine-gun tracer bullets and a few strategically placed Mills bombs.

You've heard of how Caruso used to strike a glass, get the pitch, and sing into it until the poor thing shattered into bits. That was me. As the fury of phonation spread and grew I felt as if I were about to fly violently apart in all directions. It rose and rose and rose in an unbelievable volume of amplification. and, just as I was on the verge of spontaneous combustion, it stopped. Suddenly. And thereafter I fell. Like that plummet everybody is always talking about. I fell through great vaulted reaches of black space and, while I was trying to remember whether parachute jumpers whirled their arms or legs to bring them out of a spin, I landed. Thump. It wasn't a bad thump at all, considering the rate at which I had been falling. In fact it was one of the pleasantest thumps I've ever thumped and I've thumped quite a number in my day.

I opened my eyes and gazed up into a sky filled with stars. I reached out and groped about me and could have wept for joy when my fingers encountered grass and twigs and good, substantial ground. I wasn't dumfounded or even slightly taken aback to learn that I was reclining on my back in an outdoorsy setting when I should have been in Clare Holloway's playroom. I didn't even think about it. I just closed my eyes again and concentrated on trying to keep Eliza's bread pudding surrounded. Eventually I sat up and looked blearily around. I seemed to be perched on the lip of a hill and below me was a town apparently tucked in for the night. From the size of it and lack of Neon tubing I knew it wasn't a metropolis and that it must be far removed from my natural habitat.

I wondered in a seasicky, hiccupy sort of way how I had gotten where I was. Had I run shrieking out of Clare's playroom to here—or had Parkins taken advantage of my temporary indisposition to dispose of me and my offending broom

without bothering to mention it to anybody? Was this amnesia? Was I dead?

WAS I DEAD! My lethargy vanished *whoooossssh* and I leaped to my feet and began thwacking myself like a male gorilla during the mating season. I *felt* all right. A trifle wobbly, but solid. But wouldn't a ghost feel solid to itself? Glug.

A fragment of nursery rhyme flitted through my mind.

So home went the little woman all in the dark,
Up jumped the little dog and he began to bark,
He began to bark and she began to cry,
"Lackamercy on me, this is none of I!"

Oh, good grief!

However, it appeared to be a sensible course of action. If I was I, all I had to do was walk down to that town and locate a telephone. If . . . if I was *none* of I— But I refused to continue that train of thought and resolutely began to navigate the incline, tripped over my broomstick and did what is known in aëronautical language as "a pancake." After which I was much relieved. Surely a spook wouldn't fall flat on his/her/its puss. Unless . unless it hadn't gotten the hang of it yet. *Pish.* But it was an anæmic *pish*, I assure you.

I hurriedly snared the broomstick, hoisted myself to my shaky pins and did a Glenn Cunningham off that hill reaching the outskirts of the village in zero plus. Or almost. I leaned against a sign and huffed and puffed and finally it occurred to me to look at the sign.

The sign said SALEM.

I shut my eyes and counted up to ten and opened them again. The sign still said SALEM. Obviously it *couldn't* be Salem. Salem is in Massachusetts. I smirked knowingly to myself and surmised that it had been put there to confuse motorists by one of those small, snaggle-toothed boys that apparently spring full grown into existence on Halloween. If I'd known what was in store for me, I would have smirked out of the other side of my face and run right back up that hill.

As it was I walked nonchalantly into the hamlet and down the Main Street carrying my broom over my shoulder.

As towns go it was no great shakes. There was an air of antiquity about it that was charming in a grim, unrelenting sort of way. The houses were prim and proper and just so and the shops were old-fashioned and musty-looking and everything was closed up tighter than the well-known drum. I couldn't locate anything remotely resembling a drugstore and by then I was beginning to feel uneasy. It was so quiet and there weren't any lights and it was "dead"—like a ghost town—or else one that had had a stroke of catalepsy and hadn't recovered.

When I *did* hear the sound of voices I came to a full point like a hunting dog and then loped happily off in that direction. Sure enough there was a chink of light coming out all around a door and a creaky shingle overhead informed me that this was the Blue Boar Tavern.

Just the thing, I thought. A telephone and, possibly, some pinball machines to while away the time while I waited for a taxi to take me home. Unless, of course, I wasn't me or rather if I was really lying poisoned on Clare Holloway's playroom floor while what was left of me flitted— Oh, nonsense.

I pressed down the catch and pushed open the door and stepped inside. There were long benches, and tables, and a beamed ceiling, and a shelf of tankards that Clare would have sold her grandmother for, and there was an immense fireplace, and a beery, smoky, woody smell which was delightful.

I summoned up my Indian Missions smile and advanced toward a group of men who evidently had stopped off on their way to a masked ball or else belonged to the same lodge. They all wore queer clothes, more or less alike, and had on wigs.

"Could you tell me where the telephone is?" I inquired sweetly.

If I'd said, "Could you tell me how to get to the nearest nudist colony?" the effect couldn't have been more startling.

They stopped talking *whisssst* and their mouths fell open and they goggled at me. One man in a satin waistcoat seemed to be trying to swallow his Adam's apple.

"The telephone," I said. "T-e-l-e-p-h-o-n-e. I want to call a cab."

The man who was trying to swallow his Adam's apple got to his feet and pointed at me and tried to say something, but didn't succeed. He just sort of chopped his teeth at me. Thinking he might be giving me the lodge high sign, I chopped *my* teeth at *him* and went him one better by putting my thumbs in my ears and waggling my fingers at him.

The next thing I knew, there was a pounding as of stampeding cattle and I was alone with the tankards and the tables and the heavy oaken beams that vibrated some dust down on me.

It happened so quickly that I— Well, have you ever been in a revolving door with somebody who was in hurry? No? Try it sometime. You kind of *spew*. I finished up straddling an overturned bench with my cloak over my head and one hand stuffed in a tankard of ale.

Outside I could hear voices giving tongue, practically baying, and, reflecting on the vagaries of man, I untangled myself from the cloak and set about getting the tankard off my hand. That phrase "I hope all your children grow up to be acrobats" had, up until then, always struck me as being a particularly horrible curse—in a short while I

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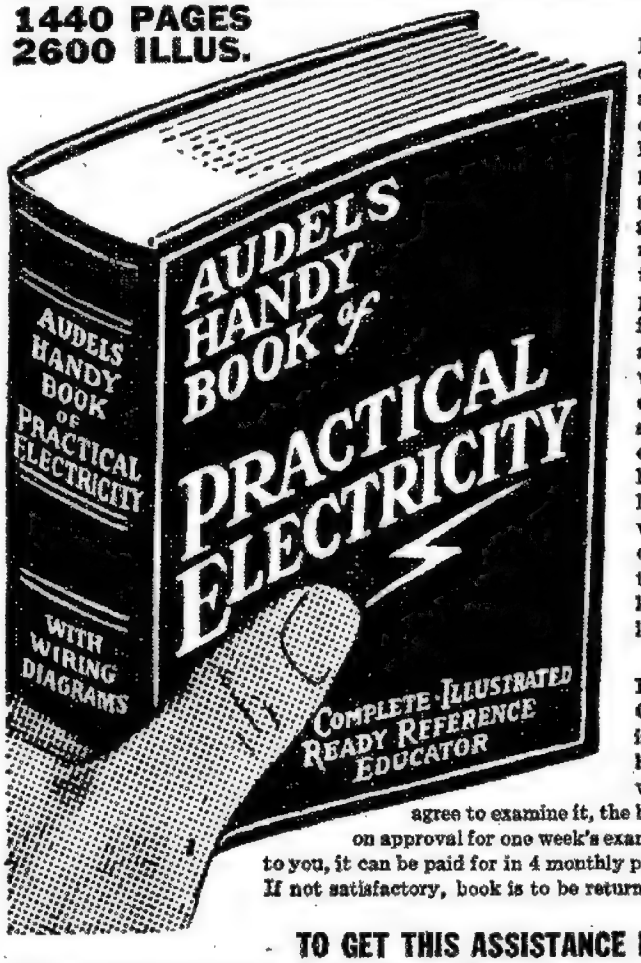
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decided that a really spine-chilling malediction was "I hope all your children grow up to get tankards on their hands."

I pried. I pulled. I pushed. I tried it slow and easy. I wrenched. I attempted to unscrew it. For fully five minutes I sweated and strained and ground the enamel off my rear molars. I lifted up my voice to my Creator, not in humble supplication, I am ashamed to say, but in apoplectic ultimatum.

I finally put the thing between my feet, gave a powerful jerk and my malt-embalmed hand came loose with a loud *"whop"* like a champagne cork and with it came some ten ounces of sudsy ale. Just then the door flew open and there were my friends, the wigs, with a battalion of townsfolk. I realize now I must have looked like a female Boris Karloff with rabies, but at that moment I didn't realize anything but that I was tired, and cross, and dripping foam, and one knuckle had a big skinned place on it, and I wanted to go home.

I wriggled my fingers to get the circulation into them and the crowd fell back from the doorway. They were a motley bunch running mostly to nightcaps and pitch pine torches and I wanted no part of them. My carnival spirit had long since vanished.

I stood up, still wriggling my fingers, and said, "Look, where is there a telephone?" Or rather that's what I *started* to say. I got as far as the "Look" and one of the wigs cried, "Avast" or "Avaunt" or some such silly thing and with a motioning wave of his arm he drew in a tide of muttering humanity after him and they all surged toward me with the plain intention of overwhelming me. And I—like a prize dolt—was so stunned that I just stood there wall-eyed and *let* them. I do vaguely remember kicking some shins and yanking a beard and there was a beautiful moment when I bloodied a not-so-beautiful nose. I went down telling myself, "This isn't real. This is a bread-pudding nightmare," and I recall saying, "How now brown cow," thinking fuzzily that *that* would prove something—I had no idea what—except that it was difficult to say through a mouthful of somebody's wig.

I was roused by a clang and a soft thud and a little whimpering cry. I sat up and groaned and straightway would have laid down again if I had dared to move a muscle. I didn't. They seemed to be stuck full of red-hot pins and had shrunk or something. Anyway they didn't fit. You know those charts where all the tendons and things, each one twisted and double twisted, are outlined in full detail? That was me. In Technicolor.

I groaned once more. This groan turned into a gasp when I saw I was in a murky six-by-twelve room with dank walls and one tiny barred window that grudgingly admitted a pale, watery shaft of sunlight which served to underscore the unmistakable atmosphere of a not-too-well-cared-for JAIL. Me. Amy Parrish. What would Eliza say!!!

Somehow, clutching at various portions of my anatomy, I maneuvered into an upright position and a huddle in the corner said, "Please. Oh, please."

"Please, oh, please be dinged," I said. "I'll have their necks for this outra— WHAT! Is there somebody in here?"

"I am," said the huddle.

I squinted through the gloom and sure enough somebody was. A girl about nineteen who was all eyes and voluminous skirt. She was regarding me as if I were the original model for Frankenstein.

"Please. Oh, please," she said.

"'Please, oh, please' what?" I snapped. "You can't just 'please, oh, please.' It's stupid. Who are you? What are you doing here? What am *I* doing here? Who is responsible for this? What is the name of this odious town? Who were all those people? Have they lost their minds? Speak up. Has the cat got your tongue?"

The blue eyes grew even larger and bluer, if possible. "I . . I—" She began to weep. Big, round, pear-shaped tears. Looked pretty when she did it, too. It's a sure-fire test for true pulchritude.

I fumbled in my pocket and produced a handkerchief. "Here," I said. "Blow your nose." If I'd offered her a black widow spider, she couldn't have been more horrified. She inched back into the corner as far as she could without going through the wall.

"Listen," I said. "What's the matter with you? What's the matter with everybody? What's the— Never mind, what's the matter with *you?*"

"Please don't put a spell on me."

"Put a spell on you?"

"Yes. Please. Oh, please don't put—"

"Will you *stop* saying 'please oh please'? It's inane. What's this twaddle about a spell?"

"It won't do any good," the girl said wringing her hands. "Really it won't. They're going to hang us, anyway. It would just be wasted. Don't put a spell on me."

"What spell," I said exasperatedly, "and how in the blue blazes am *I* going to put one on you?"

"You're a witch."

"I'm a what?"

"A witch, and witches know how—"

"HANG us!" I interrupted shrilly as I reacted to the total import of what she had said. "For WHAT?"

"For being witches."

"Now wait," I said. "I don't get it. Let's start over. Who are you? What's your name?"

"Prudence Symonds."

"Glad to know you. I'm Amy Parrish—I think. Is this a jail?"

"Yes."

"All right. Now what did you do to get put in here?"

"They say I gave Martha Talcott the Small Pocks."

Right there I began to swim out of the fog. There was something about the way she said Small Pocks, as if it were two words, that gave my brain a gentle nudge and started it functioning on about half a cylinder.

"You mean smallpox?"

"Yes. Small Pocks."

"Well, it was very careless of you. But why wasn't Martha Whosit vaccinated? They ought to put the health officer in jail. Not you."

Prudence Symonds looked at me as though I were speaking a dialect known only to carpet beetles and the inhabitants of Oz. She plucked at a fold of her skirt and kind of shivered.

"Were you going to a costume party?" I asked indicating her dress.

"Costume? These are my clothes."

She put an "a" in it. Cloathes. Small Pocks. The queer, tight houses. The fusty stores. The wigs. No telephones. No electricity. That sign—SALEM. The witches brew I had mixed. Witches, hangings, *witches*. I was dressed as a witch. Could it be that— Absurd. Impossible. Fantastic.

"Prudence," I said, and my voice sounded like it had been strained through a jelly bag. "What town is this?"

"Salem."

"Salem what?"

"Why, Salem, Massachusetts."

I wet my dry lips with an even drier tongue. "Is this . . is this what year is this?"

A puzzled frown puckered Prudence Symonds' lovely brow. "You mean the date?"

"Yes."

"Sixteen ninety-two."

"What did you say?"

"Sixteen ninety-two."

"That's what I thought you said," I bleated. And quite unexpectedly my knees went all wishy-washy and I sat down, abruptly, not even bothering to groan and my hat toppled off into my lap and I just sat there contemplating the galaxy of shiny stars and moons and symbols that decorated it.

"Merciful heavens," I said. "Great day in the morning! *Holy* jumping Jehoshaphat!"

"Please, oh, please," said Prudence Symonds scrooching into her corner and trying to draw it around her.

Well, that was that. Heretofore—or rather *there*tofore—I had believed that I was one of those efficient persons who "arise to a crisis." I had cherished a picture of myself being extremely competent in an emergency. In this picture I usually was giving orders, and slashing red tape, and being very nimble in several directions at once while those of lesser ilk admired my ability with ohs and ahs and, occasionally, bursts of applause and shouts of Bravo. Ha. And also phooey.

As a crisis ariser-to-er I was a dazzling flop, although I *was* very nimble in several directions at once—throwing myself about with a Salomelike abandon against the grillework and the walls and even managing to chin myself on the window bars. I gave some orders, too, when the jailer investigated the commotion. These, however, were a garbled lot, consisting of disjointed sentences starting with a quotation from the Bill of Rights and ending with a demand to be freed because I actually wouldn't be born for another two hundred years. The jailer threw water on me. Those of lesser ilk consisted of Prudence Symonds and an underfed, bewhiskered mouse, so the ohs and ahs were nil. The mouse darted hastily back into his hole and Prudence simply sat and shuddered at me. And after a while *I* sat and shuddered at me.

I went over it and over it and *over* it from the first sip of elixir, if you could call it that, in Clare Holloway's playroom to the episode of the wigs and my subsequent incarceration. I said, "It can't be real." I said, "Things like this don't happen." I said, "Amy Parrish, you've got

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to get *out* of here."

"!!!**?#!!!**."

It was while I was saying "!!!**?#!!!**" that the lone beam of sunlight was blotted out and, craning my neck upward, I discerned a small, bonneted, aproned, collared, petticoated, buttoned, buckled, tucked, gusseted and pleated child peering in at us. From the nature of the "cloathes" it wore I assumed it was a girl. It had its cheeks stuffed full of apples and was polishing another on its sleeve preparatory to cramming it in as soon as there was available space. It squatted on its hunkers and made faces at us and ate its apple—spitting the seeds expertly between the bars—and when it had finished it threw the core in at us and sniggered.

"Go away," I said. "You're a nasty little girl."

"And you're *witches*," it said. "Both of you. Nyaaaah."

"You ought to be spanked, young lady."

"You ought to be hung." She leveled a forefinger at us and stuck out her tongue. "And you *are* going to be," she said, "so there. Hung, hung, hung."

"Go away."

"I won't and you can't make me. Hung, hung. Going to be hung, hung, hung, hung, hung. Witches, witches, mean old witches, witches, witches, witches."

"I'll witch you," I said grimly and I crooked my fingers in the manner of Oonga-the-Hypnotic-Eye and made some rapid and complicated passes and chanted, "Boola, boola, boola, boola, we are fighting for dear old Eli. Hep!" I folded my arms dramatically. "You," I said in a somber tone, "are going to turn into a cold, green frog in exactly six hours and two minutes. Begone!"

She backed away, her mouth working, her eyes wide and glassy, and with a loud yowl of sheer terror she turned and bewent—pell-mell, petticoats flying, bonnet jouncing. I harkened to her lamentations receding like a panic-stricken fire siren and I venture to say I haven't been so pleased since I

And Prudence Symonds was pleased. Not that she gave vent to anything so unseemly as a "yipee." On the contrary. She knelt down and prayed to the Lord "to erase this sinful satisfaction" from her heart, "to cleanse her soul from the stain of unhallowed joy" and "to purify her thoughts of iniquitous gratification." From which I gleaned that Prudence and Miss Applecore had met before and Prudence had come off a bad second.

I wormed the details out of her by degrees. Miss Applecore was one Charity Beatitude Pyne, playmate of Martha "Small Pocks" Talcott, and daughter of one John Matthew Pyne, a magistrate. Mark Talcott, cousin of Martha S. P. Talcott, wanted to marry her, Prudence. Time out while Prudence sheds a few tears.

The plot thickened. It thickened still more; in fact it well nigh clabbered, when she divulged that she had been in the

employ of said John Matthew Pyne as a tutor for dear, little Charity Beatitude. It had been her painful duty, Prudence said, to chastise Charity B. with a willow switch on her open palm for refusing to be obedient.

Personally, I thought if I had a willow switch in one hand and Charity B. in the other it certainly wouldn't be her open *palm* that would get it. But of this I mentioned nothing. I just nodded and said, "Go on."

Last night was to have been the announcement of her betrothal. Instead—more tears—Martha Talcott had become ill—tears—the doctor had been called and had diagnosed the case as Small Pocks—tears. Martha, poor child, in her delirium had said awful things about Prudence and had accused her of bewitching her cousin—tears and a few smothered sobs. Charity Beatitude, poor child, had become hysterical and had joined in Martha's denunciations. The two of them had screamed at her and had charged her with unspeakable acts and wound up by accusing her of being a witch and of giving the Small Pocks to Martha—floods of tears.

Hadn't the Talcotts questioned the children further to determine the truth?

Yes. Oh, yes. But they both had had convulsive fits, claiming that she was practicing sorcery on them before the unseeing eyes of their elders. (Wiping and blowing of nose.)

Ye gods.

And just at the height of the furor, Mr. Jeremiah Larkin had dashed in spent and breathless to tell them a witch had been captured in the Blue Boar Tavern, and the children had wailed for them to take Prudence away. And they had. And th-that was the whole st-story.

A witch in the Blue Boar, eh? Well, what about this Mark? Why didn't he step in and end the proceedings? If she asked me she was lucky to be rid of such a such a . . a Nancy Pants. Any man worth his tallow would have— But I let the rest of the speech mumble itself out because Prudence Symonds gave every indication of being on the verge of swatting me over the head with my broomstick.

She would have me understand that Mark had taken her part. He had even gone so far as to swear.

Tsk.

And now he was in the public square in stocks because he had taken J. M. Pyne by the collar and had booted him down the Talcott stoop and thrown his hat and Charity Beatitude after him.

That's the ticket.

And, furthermore, he had sought to hide her from the good people of Salem and was circumvented only by being knocked unconscious with a large piece of bric-a-brac wielded by his feverish cousin Martha.

Feverish was no name for it. What a sweet hunk of lovableness *she* was.

Yes. A dear, sweet, deluded child unbalanced by illness.

At this juncture I exploded.

"Blah!" I said vehemently.

"Blah?"

"Horsefeathers."

"I don't understand."

"Applesauce, prune juice, banana oil, horse-radish. In short, nuts and double nuts."

"I'm hungry, too," she sighed.

We'll skip some two hours here. It was just me and Prudence and the mouse and a bunch of mixed-up talking. And we'll skip the bread and soup the jailer brought to us. The bread was growing on top and the soup looked like it was ready to die of malnutrition, itself. I didn't have the heart to eat it. It was so white and wan and seemed to have suffered deeply. I offered it to the mouse, but even he wouldn't touch it, so I put the

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bread in it, expecting it to sprout roots and branch out, but the bread had a sudden internal collapse and, finally, I just waited till the jailer came back to collect the bowls and spoons and threw it at him. Hit him, too.

Shortly afterward we were called for by a delegation of bewigged Salemites who—when we were securely shackled—proceeded to marshal us into court. That is, they prodded us fore and aft as if we were prize fat-tailed sheep being herded into the arena for the shearing contest. We were met with catcalls and boos and for the first time I was happy it was 1692. No pop bottles.

The presiding judge was—yep, you guessed it—none other than John Matthew Pyne in the flesh. And he did run to it, especially around the jowls which were inclined to be florid, the color extending to his nose whereon was a large wen. He would have made a splendid cover for *Punch*. Prudence whispered his identity to me and was promptly squelched by a bailiff or some such who roared, "Silence!" at her in a mighty voice. I think he was the original ancestor of all the future tobacco auctioneers.

Be that as it may, proceedings got under way with much pomp and ceremony and consulting of documents. We were formally charged with witchcraft, and we pleaded not guilty, and everybody in the courtroom rustled at us and muttered. I could see that we weren't going to be voted Misses Popularity of 1692 and, if the expressions of the jurors meant anything, the undertakers' association was going to have a short run on caskets. I don't know when I've seen so many glacial pairs of eyes outside an oculist's window, and the temperature of the crowd was about the consistency of a Deep Freeze Unit and it got no warmer fast.

Witnesses against us practically wore a rut in the aisle and I've never heard such balderdash as they dished out.

Goodwife Hannah Simms, who looked anything *but* a goodwife, testified that we had addled her pullet eggs.

My friends, the wigs, swore I had swooped into their midst on *that* broomstick and had attempted to ensnare their souls with incantations.

Mistress Faith Trow asserted that Prudence Symonds had made the Trow cow stop giving milk, and one Lucius Banbridge vowed that she had made his teeth loose, his hair fall out and had afflicted him with chills and fever. If ever a man had malaria, Lucius Banbridge was he.

We were accused of putting "blood on the moon," of causing birds to molt, of laming horses and sending weevils to live in Madam Seabright's flour bin. A corpulent dowager with wattles said we had given her grandchild colic, and a bulbous-nosed, paunchy fellow with spots on his vest asserted that he had seen the devil sitting on a tree limb in front of the Blue Boar Tavern picking his teeth with a smoking splinter and, ostensibly, waiting to keep a rendezvous with me. That testimony I didn't doubt. From the hue of the witness' nose and the habit he had of twitching spasmodically, I rather imagine he *had* seen the devil and, subsequently, had ridden home on a pink elephant with gauze wings and its trunk done up in a baby-blue snood.

Anyway, after all the evidence against us was in, we were given an opportunity to prove our innocence. Prudence Symonds said the Lord's Prayer from start to finish without a hitch which, supposedly, was a sure-fire test. In this instance it didn't work. Old Wattlepuss screeched that *proved* she was a witch possessing magical powers far greater than had been suspected and everybody went mumblemumble-mumblemumble in harmonious agreement.

I saw it would be worse than useless for me to attempt pleading my case. Prudence hadn't succeeded with the Lord's Prayer, a complexion like peaches and cream, and a demeanor that would have made Little Eva look like one of the Dead End Kids. I was not only dressed as a witch, but I *looked* like one and my appearance hadn't been improved by my gymnastics with the populace at the Blue Boar Tavern plus an overnight stay in jail. The unembellished truth would be tantamount to admitting that I was a sorceress of Grade A quality.

Now those two hours I had spent in conversation with my cellmate had been instructive. Most instructive. I had gotten a bird's-eye view of some of the respected citizens of Salem and, although the sketches were fairly spotty, I am adept at filling in vacant spaces. I can read between the lines and am clever at improvising.

I set myself and began. "If it please the court," I said, "in the interests of justice I can but say I came to Salem to clarify certain erroneous opinions."

The court's answer was right down my alley. "Opinions? Of what do you speak, woman?"

"Well," I said, "for one, the opinion that Mistress Trow has gout. She hasn't. She's got a wooden leg and, in case you're interested, her cow stopped giving milk because it's twelve years old, half starved, and the Nathan Eldridges, who live next door, are milking it on the sly. And take Jeremiah Larkin—a pillar of the church. You bet he is. And do you know why? He carries the keys to the poor box. Figure that one out.

"And her," I said pointing to Wattlepuss, "she's the lady who originated the rumor that Goodwife Simms was a ninny, a born fool, didn't keep a presentable parlor, and dipped snuff. As for Lucius Banbridge, he accepted a bribe from Madam Seabright to

give her pie the Grand Prize at the festival, and Mary Ellen Cull was so mad—you ought to hear her in a tantrum, you really ought—was so mad *she* put the weevils in the flour bin.

"And the bribe Mr. Banbridge accepted was stolen *by* Madam Seabright *from* her husband's pants pockets and he won it gambling at *cards* with those men there," I waved at the wigs. "Furthermore," I went on, "Mr. Eathan Abbott doesn't go to New York on business, like he tells *Mrs.* Eathan Abbott. He goes to see a cute little trick with big, brown eyes and an eighteen-inch waist. And Laura Camby uses powder and puts beet juice on her cheeks," I said, watching Mr. Eathan Abbott hurriedly leave the courtroom closely followed by Mrs. Eathan Abbott with an unholy light in her eyes.

As if on cue, Goodwife Simms began moving toward Wattlepuss and a bevy of irate females commenced closing in on Lucius Banbridge who had turned a gorgeous shade of cerise. A clergyman and Jeremiah Larkin were playing cats-in-the-corner-and-can't-catch-me around a post and an older woman was using her handkerchief to scrub the cheeks of a girl—whom I took to be Laura Camby. The handkerchief was slowly turning pink and so were the Nathan Eldridges. All over the room people began getting up and sneaking out as unobtrusively as possible.

"And as for you, Judge Pyne," I said, "you're determined Prudence Symonds won't marry *any*body if she won't marry you and you—"

J. M. Pyne beat a regular Drum Boogie on the rostrum with his gavel and bellowed, "Court adjourned!" And at that moment a woman ran down the aisle crying and babbling, "She put a spell on Charity. She put a spell on Charity. She did. She did. She put a spell on Charity," whereupon she caught sight of me, halted in midstride and I said "Boo!" and she fainted dead away.

"What!" yelled the judge.

"You heard her," I said calmly. "I put a spell on Charity. She's going to be a frog."

With that, pandemonium broke loose and in less time than it takes to say, passengerswillpleaserefrainfromflushingtoilets whilethetrainisstandinginthestationIloveyou the courtroom was empty.

I, perforce, remained where I was out of respect for the forty-odd pounds of chain that was draped becomingly about my person. I couldn't very well pick it up and run with it because it was fastened to a hook in the floor. So I just stood there while Judge Pyne's blood vessels expanded as far as they could without bursting and the jailer threw water on the faintee. (His mother must have been scared by a spring freshet. I've seldom met anyone with such a phobia for throwing water.) The faintee rallies and took up her keening where she'd left off and Prudence Symonds gave me a glazed look and said, "Marry me? You mean . . he . . I . . . because . . that is—"

"Exactly," I said.

There will now be a brief pause for station identification while Judge Pyne gets control of his blood vessels and Prudence Symonds looks at him like he is a bowl of jail soup and the jailer draws another bucket of water, just in case, and the faintee resumes her tale of woe and I think longingly of things like Houdini and jujitsu and the two-sided cakes that Alice in Wonderland used to nibble.

I will say this, in Judge Pyne, Charity Beatitude had a doting father. When he got the gist of what was in the offing for his Charity B. he came all over pale and sort of went "gobble."

I smiled reassuringly at him and said, "Don't worry. She'll get used to it. Once she learns

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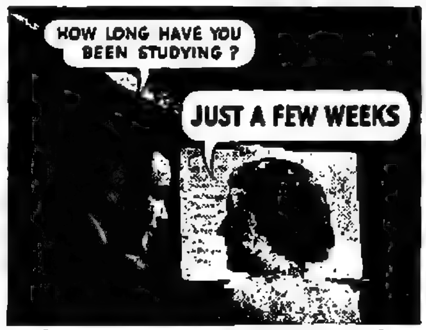

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Name

Street

City

to eat flies and sit on a lily pad there's *nothing* to it."

"She's already turning green," yipped the swooning swan, "and she complains of horrendous pains."

I wasn't surprised considering her fondness for apples. But I said, "That's the warts forming. I start them from the inside out. These'll be beauts. Each wart will be shaped like a rosette and will spell out Patent Pending."

"We haven't a moment to waste," yelped John Matthew, darting off his pedestal and coming down to grab me by the arm and start for the door. I only went so far and the chain yanked me back.

"Keys. Keys," he bawled to the jailer. "Keys. Get this . . . this confounded . . . get this *off*."

"Hold on," I said. "Not so fast. What's cooking? Do you want me to release your daughter from this spell? Is that it?"

"Be still," said the jailer. "I can't unlock this here if you keep moving."

"If you *don't* release her," said J. M. Pyne to me, "I'll have a stake driven through your black heart. Do you understand? Do you understand?"

"Listen, sonny," I said to the jailer, "don't unlock that, yet."

"He said to. Keep still, will you," said the jailer to me.

"Hurry," said J. M. to the jailer. "Blast you, hurry!"

"She won't keep still," said the jailer plaintively to J. M.

"Unlock it," I said to the jailer, "and take the consequences."

"Wha-what do you mean?" said the jailer to me.

"Hurry!" squawked J. M. at both of us. "Hurry UP!"

"I mean," I said darkly to the jailer, "I'll put a spell on you, buddy. I've got a dinger just your size. It comes in three shades. Strangulated Purple, Choking Pink and Throttle Red."

That stopped him. Cold. He crept away to a safe distance and began to shake like an aspen. Or is it quiver? Anyhow, he definitely gave the impression of having vertical heaves. Pyne fetched him a clout and, snatching the keys from him, launched a major offensive on my chain.

"I'll de-enchant your daughter on one condition," I said, "and you'll hear me out before you unfetter me or it'll be too bad. Too, *too* bad."

It worked. True, he fiddled for a second, but when I reminded him about the warts, he gave up. I must admit he had quite a tussle with himself before he did—but he *did* did. I laid down the terms in short sentences and he accepted them, although it took another tussle more severe than the first, and he looked at Prudence Symonds much as if he were the original starving Armenian and she were a blue-plate dinner.

The terms were: two saddled horses, Mark Talcott, money and three hours, in exchange for Charity Beatitude's immunity from webfoot.

The horses arrived, brought by a hostler who, if he had been born a couple of centuries later, would have knocked the props from under Abbott and Costello. He fell over his feet twice and almost lost his pants and, somehow, got his hat wedged down over his ears before he was sent packing by J. M. as per my instructions.

I'll spare you the touching scene that ensued when Mark and Prudence were reunited. You'd either cry or be sick to your stomach, depending on how you like your romance. Straight without a chaser or— Well, is there any *other* way?

The money was queer, but there seemed to be a lot of it, so I didn't fuss.

And the three hours. Ah me, those three hours. Before they were over I'd have given my best corset, a set of tires, and a fifty-pound sack of sugar for respite. You see, as an assurance of my good faith, I insisted on having myself left enchained while Mark and Prudence made their exit to another and less witch-minded section of the country. Three hours gave them quite a margin of safety. It was the only solution. I felt sure that J. M. Pyne would suffer a change of heart the minute I said "abracadabra" over Charity B. and that Prudence, if she were around, and Mark, if he were, and I, how else could I *not* be, having to be on the scene to say "abracadabra," would all be grabbed forthwith and double denounced. Consequently, me and the chains. It made a good show. Much better than if I had been ensconced in the Pyne residence and J. M. had had an opportunity to observe Charity B. firsthand and discover she was having indigestion instead of pollywogitis.

It took some doing to get Mark and Prudence on those horses. Prudence was all set to dig in her heels and stay with me and Mark was all set to stay and whale the living dickens out of J. M., but I finally convinced them by the simple expedient of whispering in Prudence's ear and telling her not to fret, that "witches had *powers*," and if she ever had any girl chidren to name one of them Amy—and by whispering in Mark's ear not to stew that "I, personally, will see to the Pyne stuffings," and if he ever had any boy children to name one of them Parrish and added that they'd better get a move on before the villagers came back and put the lid on it.

Prudence gave me a hug and shed a tear on me and asserted vigorously that I was a "nice" witch and they were gone before I fully realized it, being temporarily blacked out by a kiss which Mark Talcott planted smack on my mouth. If I'd been some twenty years younger— Whoops!

If it's all the same to you, we'll trip lightly over the ensuing three hours. Let it suffice

that by the time they had passed —like so many big, gray, lazy, slow-footed elephants holding tails—I had evolved a new theory of geopolitics, done the multiplication tables backward and forward ninety times, thought up six sets of questions for Information Please, and worked out a mental synopsis for a mystery novel in which J. M. P. was shot, stabbed, poisoned and hung, and the murderer—me—was not only commended, but was presented with a bronze plaque and a trip to Hollywood, all expenses paid.

While I was thus engaged, the villagers sent a deputation to say they recommended my immediate removal without trial, said removal to be accomplished with a stake and some lighted fagots, *tout de suite*—and the touter the suiter—and where, pray, were Prudence Symonds and Mark Talcott?

John Matthew sent them back to the villagers to tell them the Situation Was Well in Hand and for them to Stand By in Readiness until Further Notice —but that I was not to be Molested in Any Way No Matter What, until he gave the Signal. And Prudence Symonds and Mark Talcott were to be Dealt With when the Time Came.

When the deputation had deputed, he explained that naturally Mark and Prudence would *not* be Dealt With and that he wouldn't *give* any Signal, hahahahaha.

And I said, naturally, hahahahaha, because he was a man of honor and integrity and, furthermore, would look like hell if he should "so happen" to turn into a scaly-backed lizard.

"Hahaha," he said.

"Hahaha," I said.

The jailer went out for another bucket of water to revive the faintee.

So it was I was not Molested in Any Way when J. M. Pyne and I fared forth at the dusky zero hour to reclaim Charity B. The streets, in fact, were deserted even though a few doors were open a crack and here and there a blind was raised a discreet inch and a curtain pulled a weensy bit off center.

The house of Pyne was lighted up like a Christmas tree when we arrived and was filled with heavenly antiques and moaning servants, also antiques, and not so heavenly—running mostly to wet noses and trembling chins.

I was hustled upstairs and thrust into a bedroom and somebody on the bed kind of squeeched at me and tried to burrow under the covers. The somebody was Charity B. and she was as green as a mildewed sock.

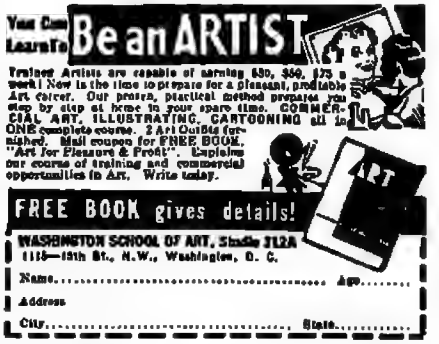
I said, "Boola, boola," and she squeeched again and burrowed so far under the covers that she came out at the bottom, squeeched once more and flopped back up to the top.

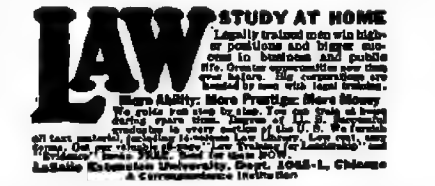
J. M. began moaning with the servants and between moans beseeched me to do something—do something—DO something.

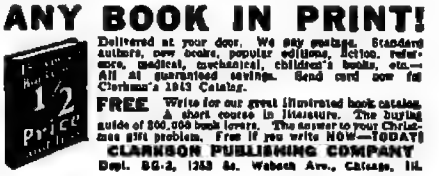
I did. After all, Charity B. had learned her lesson and a stomach-ache is no fun, and besides J. M. might get wise and that would never do as I wanted to be well out of Salem ahead of any stakes and fagots.

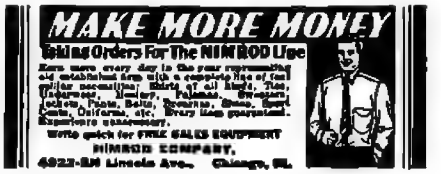
Therefore, I prepared an emetic. I sent for innumerable jars and basins and shook my head sadly that there was no wolfsbane or deadly nightshade in the house, but said that I *could* use salt, soda and mustard seed with the addition of some choice incantations. Salt, soda and mustard seed were forthcoming and, giving the largest basin to a quaking servant to hold in front of Charity B., I incanted like Billy be damned.

"Hut sut rawlson on the rillerah," I droned low, "Hidehidehi," I shrieked, "Hodehodeho," I squalled, "with a razzmatazz and a sisboombah N. Y. U. yeah, rah, *rah*, RAH!" I filled a cup with salt, water and mustard seed, put in a hefty scoop of soda and, when it fizzed









up, yelled, "Shoot the sherbet to me, Herbert," and poured it down Charity B.'s gullet.

The results were all that could be expected. She must have eaten a peck of apples.

Slowly the greenish tinge left her face and she sank back with a contented sigh and promptly went to sleep.

"Is she . . . is she . . . will she . . . she won't—" said J. M. Pyne.

"No," I said, "she won't. I got her in the nick, old boy. Now it's up to you to complete the bargain."

"Yes," he said. "Of course." He mopped his brow and straightened his waistcoat and gazed at me speculatively.

"You're sure she won't?" he asked, a look of extraordinary cunning overspreading his countenance.

"Absolutely," I said, a look of extraordinary cunning overspreading *my* countenance.

"We're . . . we're safe, then?"

"Righto," I chirped, "providing I don't decide to use *this*," and I flung out a hand and dexterously uprooted a tuft of hair from his pate—almost the *only* tuft, I might say.

"Ouch!" The look of extraordinary cunning turning into a look of intermingled pain and apprehension.

I exhibited the tuft tantalizingly. "Don't forget that scaly-backed lizard I'm saving. With your name on it." I popped the tuft in my pocket and grinned at him impudently.

"Oh," he said. And, after a long pause, "Very well. Follow me."

We were halfway down the stair well when the front door flew open with a bang and a woman bounced in dragging a child by one limp arm. A glance at the child told me that this was Martha "Small Pocks" Talcott and I surmised instantly that I was going to be assigned the role of Healer and that it wasn't Small Pocks, but chicken pox of the Diggots-Marksbury variety.

Visions arose of me spending the rest of my life in Salem as a general practioner and momentarily I lost myself in a rose-tinted dream of me as a sort of combination Florence Nightingale, Louis Pasteur and the Mayo Clinic—incidentally, coining money hand over fist.

This bubble burst as the word "apples" registered on my reverie-swathed brain. I came to earth with a leaden clunk in the middle of *Mrs.* "Small Pocks" Talcott's speech.

"—and so she ate all those apples and I didn't know it until just now when Martha told me and she hasn't got the Small Pocks, she's got the plain Pox, and when I heard what had happened I said right away it was those apples and Prudence and Mark were accused unjustly and even if this is a witch, which she isn't, it's not a spell but apples, so I brought Martha along with me to prove it and I would advise salt, soda and mustard seed and a turnip poultice."

"What!" thundered Judge Pyne.

"Pay no attention to her," I commanded. And, to Mrs. "S. P." Talcott, I said sternly, "Stand aside."

"It wath the applth in the thellar," spoke up Martha "S. P." Talcott. "Thsee ate pretty near thixteen I gueth. And I ittch thomething fierth."

J. P.: "What!"

M. T.: "I ittch."

Mrs. T.: "It was the apples, all those *apples* Charity ate and she isn't under a charm or anything of the sort and this woman is an impostor and now you can release Prudence and Mark, and, Martha, *will* you stop scratching?"

M. T.: "I ittch."

Me: "Stand aside!"

J. P.: "You mean that Charity—"

Mrs. T.: "Yes. How she ever held them all I can't—"

M. T. (proudly): "Thsee frowed up oncth and had to thtart over."

Mrs. T.: "Martha!"

Martha (holding her ground): "Well, thsee did and whath more thsee—"

Mrs. T.: "MARTHA!"

M. T. (subsiding meekly): "Yeth, ma'am."

Me: "*Stand aside!*"

J. P. (turning a livid face toward me and advancing ominously up the steps while I retreated: "Why, you—"

Me: "Remember that scaly-backed lizard! If you lay a hand on me I'll put a spell on you that'll—"

At this point I inadvertently put my heel on my cloak, teetered uncertainly and grabbed for support at the nearest thing. The nearest thing was J. M. and the grabbing was completely mutual. He, however, grabbed with a vengeance and I biffed him one, and he biffed me one and, all of a sudden, I was filled with a white-hot, boiling, liquid anger. Everything got misty and I opened my mouth to cast raucous aspersions on his antecedents, but to my utter astonishment I emitted a stream of unintelligible gibberish. It came out all by itself and seemed to be composed entirely of tongue clickings and words beginning with z and ending in xy.

It sounded perfectly hideous. The mist rolled in thicker than ever while uncontrollable syllables of deadly venom rolled from between my lips entirely without my volition. I was dimly conscious that the vestibule was filling with people, hordes of people, carrying pitch-pine torches, and clubs, and wicked-looking, three-tined hay forks. From behind me I heard the stealthy rustle of skirts and knew the servants were forming for a rear attack—effectively preventing escape.

Someone screamed. And screamed. And screamed. And everybody began to close in.

I unloosed one long, final jabbering burst of senselessness,

and then *I* screamed. And screamed. And screamed. Because in my grasp, J. M. Pyne shriveled and wrinkled and dwindled and narrowed, and a row of tiny spines grew from his neck beneath his coat collar, and his eyes became beady and still, and his hands wasted away into claws and *phsssssst*, like that, he shrunk out of sight into his "cloathes." The "cloathes" crumpled and fell into a bodiless heap and something squiggled and squirmed in my pocket. The pocket where I had deposited the tuft of hair. And out of that pocket poked a head. A small, brown head. A lizard. Four inches of scaly backed lizard!

I was a witch. I was a witch. I was a WITCH! Me. Amy Parrish. What would Eliza say! I tried to stop screaming, and couldn't. I tried to think, and couldn't. I tried to close out the sound of yelling voices and the smell of burning pitch. I stood —like Lot's wife—and watched a man come up the stairs with a hay fork fixed like a bayonet.

I suppose I must have made an attempt to dodge, for unexpectedly I became twined about that dratted broomstick and, flailing with my arms to break the fall, I skittered down the stairs. And then it happened. I went right over the heads of the crowd. I did.

Straddling my broomstick, I zoomed above them, banked and skinned out the door with part of a chandelier wound around my neck and a piece of lace curtain flapping from one ankle. Why I didn't fall off, I can't understand. I was so flabbergasted that I guess my nerve centers were slow on the uptake. I just thought, "I'm a witch, I'm a witch, I'm a witch."

Perhaps, I'd have made out all right if it hadn't been for John Matthew Lizard. I might have learned how to steer and turn and make three-point landings and, possibly, could have built up an air-mail route with practice—but J. M. Lizard crawled out of my pocket and that was that.

I said, "Gawk," and somehow lost my equilibrium, and the next thing I knew I was sailing along upside down like a three-toed sloth while J. M.—evidently as scared as I—attempted to run up my sleeve. I kicked at him. The broomstick wobbled, went into a spin, we twirled down, down, down, and the last thing I remember is passing a nighthawk with a field mouse in its beak. Darkness enveloped me as with a loud wham I met extremely solid ground.

I pushed at it. I sat up. It pushed at me and said, "Lay back down, Miss Amy."

I opened my eyes and looked up at—Eliza. A Roman candle went off inside my skull, and I "lay back down" hurriedly.

"An' you a growed woman," said Eliza. "*Tsk.*"

"Eliza," I said weakly, "are you you?"

"Who you think I is," said Eliza disgustedly, "Aunt Jemima?"

"Am I me?"

"Humph," said Eliza.

"Where am I?"

"In yo' bed."

"How . . . how did I get here?"

"I poured you in it after Miss Holloway's party."

"After Miss Holloway's party? Did I . was I what party?"

"The Halloween party Miss Holloway give. Sho was a lot of hullabalooing an' from what I hears you was the main attraction."

"*I* was!"

"Yass'm. You was the one who did the hula dance on top the gran' piano. In a lamp shade."

"I did?"

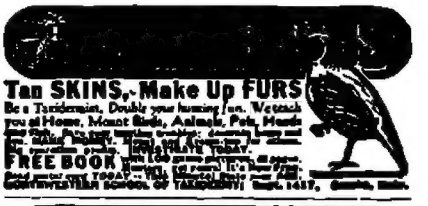
"Yass'm."

"I *did!*"

"Yass'm. An' you spilled somepn all ovah the floor befo' you ever got good an' started."

"Before?"

"Yass'm. Somepn what has



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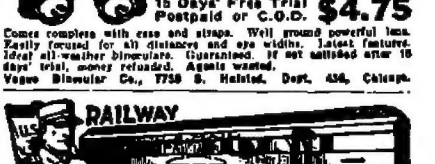

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COMING UP!

Moving up in the month, henceforth, Astounding Science-Fiction's publication date moves forward from the third Friday to the *Second Friday* next month.

Watch for the December Astounding *one week earlier.*

Out November 13, 1942.

done ruint my Dutch oven. Jest *ruint* it."

"It did?"

"An' you—'

"Eliza, what time is it?"

"It's ten o'clock in the mawnin'."

"What day is it?"

"Sunday. Miss Amy, you—"

"What year is it, Eliza?"

"1942. Miss Amy, I advises you to—"

"And this *isn't* Salem, is it, Eliza?"

"Says which, Miss Amy?"

"What city is this?"

"Same one 'twas yestdiddy," she observed sourly. "Now I fixed you some tomato juice and a ice pack and I advises you to —"

"Eliza, was I at Miss Holloway's party *all* the time?"

"From what I hears, Miss Amy, you was not only at it, you *was* it. Now ain't nothing better for a hangover than tomato juice an' a ice pack—"

"Have I got a hangover?"

"Has you got a—looky here, Miss Amy, I ain't got time to fool. I has got work to do whether *some* people has or hasn't. Drink this here tomato juice and put this here ice pack on yo' head and when you feel better *you* can tend to that lizard 'cause I for one ain't goin' to touch it. Not with a ten-foot pole I ain't an'—lay down, Miss Amy, 'tain't goin' to help—"

"Lizard! WHAT lizard?"

"That lizard you brung home. At least I reckon you did. Anyways, *there* it is an' I *ain't* goin' to touch it."

"Oh," I said. "Oh. Oh, my goodness. Oh, my *goodness!*"

"Yass'm," said Eliza. "That's the way I feels about it."

It was a small brown, scaly backed lizard with a tiny row of spines down its back and it squatted, or sat, or whatever it is that lizards do, on my typewriter desk and its throat went in and out and it looked at me with beady, black, unwinking eyes.

That's the end of the story. Unless you'd like to go out to the zoo some day and visit the reptile house. You'll find the lizard in a glass-inclosed cage with a hundred others, but it's easy to pick out because it has a wen on its nose.

The answer? Listen, don't ask me. I don't know. Clare Holloway—to whom I have breathed not a word—says that I was hilariously plotzed throughout the entire evening and wasn't absent for a moment. She also says that chipped, cracked and blackened beaker was *supposed* to be a genuine witch's cup—vintage of Salem 1692. But she states happily that she thinks it was a poor imitation, and she's glad I smashed it into smithereens, but puh-lease not to spill any more messes on her playroom floor as it eats the paint off. She needn't worry on that score. The nearest thing to an elixir *I'll* ever concoct will be a dry Martini.

Was it the elixir? Or was it the beaker? Would water out of that container have had the same effect? Was there, perchance, a drop of something left in the beaker, that I quaffed down with the chocolate, marshmallow, vermouth whatchamacallit? Is it true that witches can be present at a gathering while their spirits soar off over the rim of Time? Was the whole thing a figment of my too fertile imagination? How come the lizard, if it was? He certainly was no figment. Maybe the lizard crawled in the scullery window. But isn't it stretching credulity to ignore the wen on its nose? And from whence came that scrap of lace curtain Eliza brought in to show me?—having found it on her broom and thinking I had wrapped it around the broom to keep her from finding out the bristles were burnt and smelled of pitch pine. And isn't it strange that—say, turn the light on, will you? It's sort of dark in here, don't you think?

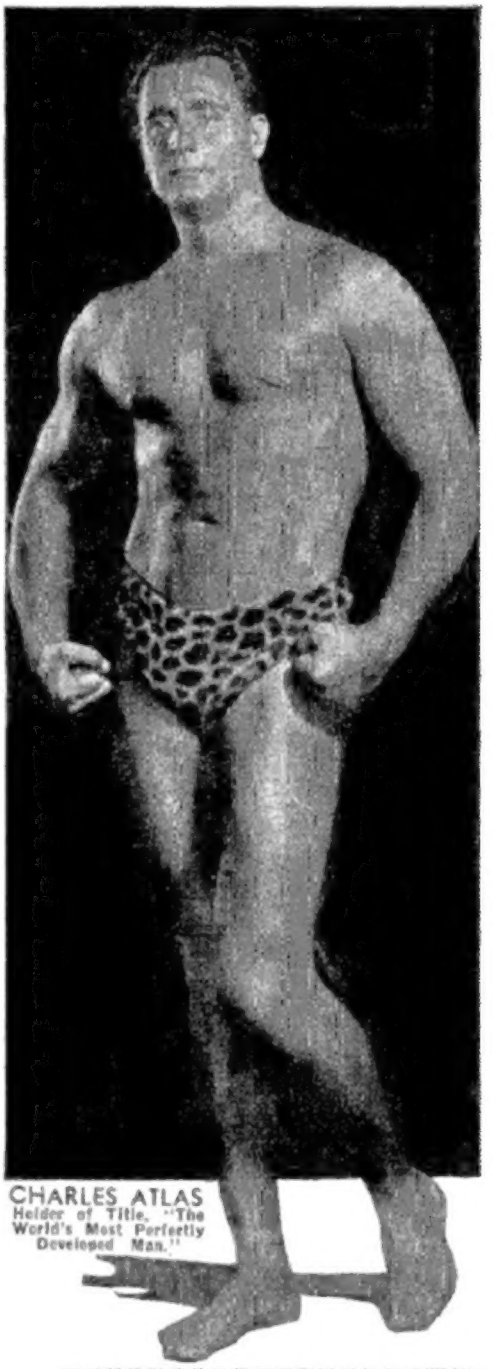
THE END.

The 97 Pound Weakling

—who became "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

"I'll prove that YOU, too, can be a NEW MAN!"

—Charles Atlas



I KNOW, myself, what it means to have the kind of body that people pity! Of course, you wouldn't know it to look at me now, but I was once a skinny weakling who weighed only 97 lbs.! I was ashamed to strip for sports or undress for a swim. I was such a poor specimen of physical development that I was constantly self-conscious and embarrassed. And I felt only HALF-ALIVE.

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